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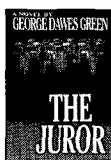
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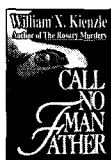
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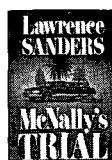
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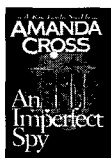
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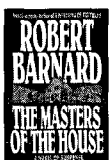
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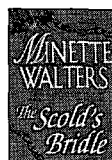
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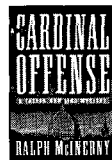
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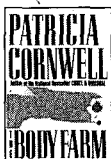
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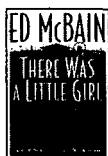
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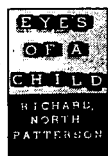
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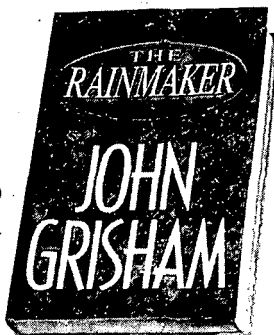


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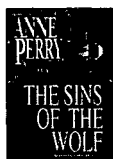
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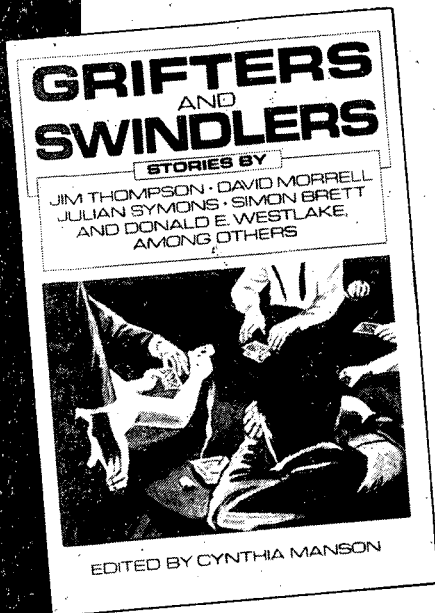
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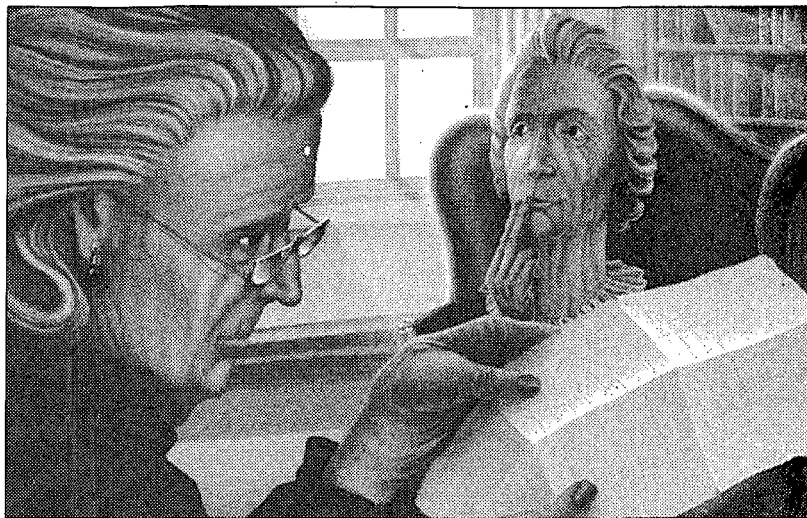
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GRAND THEFT

by Ray Bradbury

Emily Wilkes had her eyes pried open by a peculiar sound at three o'clock in the deep morning, with no moon, and only the stars as witness.

"Rose?" she said.

Her sister, in a separate bed not three feet away, already had her eyes wide, so was not surprised.

"You *hear* it?" she said, spoiling everything.

"I was going to tell *you*," said Emily.

"What?" said Rose.

"Since you already seem to know, there's no use—"

She stopped and sat up in bed, as did Rose, both pulled by invisible wires. They sat there, two ancient sisters, one eighty, the other eighty-one, both bone-thin and bundles of nerves because they were staring at the ceiling.

Emily Wilkes nodded her head up. "That what you heard?"

"Yep," said Rose.

"Mice in the attic?"

"Sound bigger'n that. Rats."

"Yes, but it sounds like they're wearing shoes and carrying weights."

That did it. They were out of bed, grabbing their wrappers, and downstairs as fast as arthritis could carry them. Nobody wanted to be in that room right underneath whoever was wearing those shoes.

Once downstairs, they gripped the banister and stared up, whispering.

"What would anyone be doing in our attic *this* time of night?"

"Burgling our house?"

"Burgling our *attic*?"

"You don't think they'll come down and attack us, do you?"

"What, two old women, all bones, no flesh?"

"Well . . ."

"Come to think, the trapdoor only works one way, and we got it locked on the stairwell side beneath."

That made them begin to go step by step slowly back up toward the now faint noises.

"I know what they're up to," said Rose, suddenly. "I saw something in the Chicago papers a week ago. They're stealing antique furniture."

"Pshaw! The only antiques we got are when *we* go in the attic."

"Still, there's old stuff there. A Morris chair, that's old. And some dining-room chairs, even older, and a cut-crystal chandelier."

"From the five-and-dime store, 1914. So ugly we hid it instead of throwing it out with the trash. Listen."

Ray Bradbury wrote his first short story in 1932, at the age of twelve, on a toy typewriter. By the age of twenty-one his first paid publication had appeared in *Super Science Stories*. Although his earliest interests as a writer revolved around the worlds of fantasy and science fiction, some of the great names in mystery fiction figured in his childhood reading, and he has contributed to our genre throughout his long and distinguished career. ¶

It had gotten even quieter above them. Back on the top floor, they gazed at the trapdoor in the ceiling and cocked their ears.

"Someone's opening my trunk," cried Emily, and clapped her hands to her mouth. "I can tell. The hinges need oiling."

"Why would they be opening your trunk? Nothing there, is there?"

"Nothing. Something, I don't know. Listen."

Above, in the dark, the trunk lid fell into place.

"Clumsy," whispered Emily.

Someone tiptoed across the attic floor, being careful now that they had been so clumsy. There were further sounds on the far side of the house.

"There's a window there, they got to be climbing out."

They ran to their own bedroom window on the west side of the house. "Unlock the screen, poke your head out!" cried Rose.

"And let them see me? No ma'am!"

They waited and heard a scraping noise and then a clatter as something fell on the driveway below.

Taking a breath, they unlocked the screen, pushed it out, and peered down in time to see a long ladder being toted along the driveway by two shadows. One of the shadows carried a small white packet in his free hand.

"Don't look like they stole nothing," said Rose.

"No," said Emily with a pale voice. "They stole something all right. Come on! They must have a pickup truck with that size ladder. Maybe we can get the license."

They opened the front door cautiously and peered out. There were two sets of footprints on the front lawn in the dew. One coming in, one going out. And the truck, at the curb, its lights off, running its motor and pulling away.

With the door flung wide, both ladies ran out, shading their eyes to blink after the vanishing license plate.

"Damnation!" cried Emily. "Did you see?"

"I saw a seven and a nine, that's all."

"Damnation. Come on!"

"Do we call the police?"

"We ain't been in the attic yet. Can't call the police till we know what's gone."

With a flashlight, on the attic stairs, they unlocked the trapdoor and stepped up into darkness.

Emily swept the attic room with the flash. They moved carefully among old suitcases, a child's bike, and the ugly chandelier.

"Don't look like they took nothing," said Rose. "Peculiar."

"Maybe so, maybe not. Here's the trunk. Let's see."

They both took hold of the lid and heaved. The lid sprang back with an exhalation of dust and ancient scent.

"I know that smell. Ben Hur perfume, 1925, when the movie came out."

"Hush," said Emily. And then, "Oh, hush!"

She poked the flashlight down. There was an empty place in the middle of an old party dress: a sort of crushed-down pocket, two inches deep, four inches wide, and eight inches long.

"Oh, dear God in Heaven!" cried Emily. "They're gone. They're taken. They're stolen and gone!"

"What?" said Rose.

"My love letters! From 1933 and 1934 and 1935. Wrapped in a pink ribbon, thirty of them. Not one of them left. Gone!"

She held on to her bosom as if at any moment her heart might leap forth.

"But," said Rose, staring down at the coffin-shaped emptiness in the middle of the old party dress, "why would anyone steal love letters from so far back from someone probably dead to someone almost dead like you?"

"Rose Ann Watriss. What *year* is this?" exclaimed Emily.

"What d'ya mean?"

"Well, do you watch those afternoon TV shows where they should have their mouths washed out with soap?"

"Yes—"

"And you read the gossip columns in the town paper?"

"Sometimes, I—"

"And you look at the crazy ladies magazines at the beauty parlor?"

"I try *not* to."

"Well, there you *are*! This whole time we're living in got up on the mean side of the bed. Our phone'll ring tomorrow morning and whoever stole the letter'll want money to give them back, or offer to make a book of them for the madwoman's book club, or put them in a lovelorn column for advice. Blackmail. Publicity. All *that*."

"Oh no, Emily!"

"Oh yes, Rose. Come on!"

"To call the police?"

"And wash my underwear in public? Is there any of that grape wine left in the pantry?"

"Some."

"Some is better than none. Come on, Rose, don't stand there. It's the end of the world!"

They almost fell, going down.

The next day, every time a Special Delivery mail truck ran by Emily would part the parlor curtains and wait for it to stop, but it never did.

The day after that, when a number of TV-repair trucks slowed as if to seek an address, Emily opened the front door, expecting some ill-mannered local TV reporters to come nosing in. They never nosed.

On the third day, when intuition said there had been time enough for the fancy ladies magazines' gossip columnists or the *Green Town Gazette* newspaper to save up their spit and let fly, the spit was never saved or flown.

Emily let out a gust of exasperation and went to crush grapes to ferment new wine.

Not realizing what would happen on the fourth day . . .

On the fourth day a single letter fell in her mailbox. How it got there she couldn't imagine, for the mailman was nowhere in sight. And her name on the front of the letter looked as if it had been written in lemon juice and then faintly burned to brown the calligraphy.

"And," she whispered, "it's addressed to my *maiden* name!"

"Let me see that!" Rose snatched at the letter. "Emily Bernice Watriss. That's you. And look, there's a two-cent stamp and the cancel date: June 4th, 1935. Oh, Emily, Emily!" Her hand failed. Emily caught the letter and held it up to the light to x-ray its mystery.

"Whoever stole this letter four nights ago," she said, "now, he's sending them *back* to me! Why?"

"I can't say," said Rose, "if you don't open it. The outside envelope is sixty years old. What about the letter itself?"

Emily shut her eyes, took a deep breath, and carefully opened the envelope and took out the brittle paper with brownish handwriting in a fine Palmer penmanship flourish.

"Well?" said Rose.

"June 4th, 1935. Same as the date on the envelope. And the letter says: 'My dearest dear Emily—'"

"Good grief," said Rose, "that is a love letter."

Emily stopped, folded the letter, and let a tear drop from one eye.

"Well, go on, go on," said Rose.

"It's *my* love letter," said Emily.

"I know, I know, but we're two old battle-axes now. My ear won't be offended or torn by anything it hears this late in time . . . If you won't read it out loud, hand it over!"

Emily did not resist. Rose turned the letter toward the light and squinted. She read aloud for a few lines and then her voice faded. Only her eyes moved along the fine calligraphy from a year a long while back:

My dearest dear Emily,

I know not how to address you or pour out all that is in my heart. I have admired you for so many months and years, and yet when I have seen you, when we have danced or shared picnics with your friends at the lake, I have found myself unable to speak. Each time, I go home and stare at myself in the mirror and hate my cowardice. But now at last I must speak my tenderest thoughts or find myself mad beyond salvation. Even now, I fear to offend you, and this letter of a few words will take many hours to write and rewrite. Dear, dear Emily, know my affection and my willingness to share some part of your life near or with you. If you could look upon me with just the smallest kind intent, I would be overcome with happiness. I have had to stop myself from touching your hand when I sat near you. And the thought of anything more than that, the merest kiss, shakes me that I dare to put it in words. My intentions are honorable and if you would permit at some time in the near future, I would like to meet with and speak to your parents. Until that hour and that day, I send you my affections and kindest thoughts for your future life and existence.

Rose's voice began to sound again with these last words . . .

"Signed," she murmured, "William Ross Fielding."

Rose turned to glance at her sister.

"William Ross Fielding? Who is *he*?"

"Who *was* he, you mean. That letter's from 1935."

"Who was he, then, writing to you and in love. Who *was* he?"

"I don't know," Emily Bernice Watriss said. And took back the letter. And cried some more.

* * *

Every day for the next week, the letters arrived. Not delivered by the mailman who, when asked, confessed to ignorance, but dropped in the box at dawn, or twilight, or in the middle of the night. One by one, they were there and read aloud by Rose and sometimes Emily, taking turns because whoever did the reading did the most crying.

The letters, day by day, ran pretty much in the same tone and style and anguish. The writer of the letters moved from exultation to despair, all in a few short paragraphs, and begged Emily Watriss's pardon and worried about her future life and signed himself William Ross Fielding with almost an audible sigh.

And each day Rose, when finished, would sigh along the edge of the letter and say to her sister, "Do you *begin* to remember?"

"A face to go with the name? It's gone."

"Well, *try*," said Rose. "Listen. I'll read it again."

But by the end of the week, with six letters stacked and aging even faster, delivered from 1935 with no return address, Emily, behind her closed eyelids, trying to shape a man to go with the signature, gave up and fell back, exhausted.

"The letters keep coming, but the blackmailer doesn't call and own up," she said.

"What makes you think it's a blackmailer?"

"Well, what other reason would there be to torture me like this? It's beastly. It's inhuman. The next letter that comes, tear it up!"

"Oh," cried Rose, softly, "I couldn't do *that*!"

She rose as if to run protect the mail delivery and came back with a puzzled look on her face. She handed over not an ancient letter, but a brand spanking new one, an envelope with no name or address on the front and no salutation or signature inside.

"I already read it," said Rose. "Now, *you*."

Emily read: "I am ashamed of what's been going on. I did not steal. I only helped. If you want to get your mail back, go to 11 South St. James. Sorry."

Emily looked up. "What do you make of that?"

"I don't know," said Rose. "But another idea just came to me. Suppose whoever is sending your letters back to you is making love—"

"Bosh!"

"Let me finish. Is making love to you with someone else's letters written sixty years ago."

"Bosh! Talk like that and I'll blush all over!"

"Well, consider, think!"

"Go to all the trouble of climbing a ladder to steal and climb down and send? Why didn't they just stand in the yard and yell?"

"Because," said Rose quietly, turning the last note over and over in her fingers, "maybe whoever it is is just as shy today as William Ross Fielding was way back in that June you can't remember."

"Bosh!"

Rose looked up at her eighty-one-year-old sister now and said, "Well, what are you going to do? What's your next move?"

"I wonder," said Emily, "who lives at Eleven South St. James and has got my lost mail?"

"Only one way to find out," said Rose.

"Here it is. Eleven South St. James."

They stood on the edge of the lawn, looking in at a Victorian Gothic house at least twenty years older than either of them.

"I wonder who's in there?" said Emily.

"Not the man who sent you this last note, confessing," said Rose. "All he did was help carry the ladder and got overwhelmed with guilt and had to throw up. No, whoever's in there is the ungentlemanly gent who's been sending the old letters, for whatever reasons, bad or good."

"Your second sight, Rose," said Emily, "is overwrought."

"'Course, we could've asked this block's postman or the neighbors or the patrolman, who lives in this house."

"It's bad enough we're here, without drawing attention. Shake a leg, Rose."

They went up the walk and climbed the porch stairs and crossed the porch and rang the bell. After a long while, the door drifted slowly open. An old man, well into his eighties, and astonished, stood there.

"Why, Emily Bernice Watriss," he said. "Hello."

"What," said Emily, "in hell's name are you *up* to?"

"Right now," he admitted, "opening the door and asking you in. Tea's ready. Yes?"

The two ladies sidled in, looking only at the floor, and were soon seated while he poured teakettle water over the Orange Pekoe leaves, glancing up from time to time to watch Emily's fingers tumble and grasp the small packet of yellowed letters she held in her lap.

"Cream or lemon?" he asked.

"Don't cream and lemon me," Emily exclaimed.

"Please," he said, "drink a bit. I'll explain."

He placed the teacups across from the two ladies and withstood their stares as he sipped from his own cup. After a long silence he said:

"My friend called me and admitted he had written to you and given you my address. In a way, I'm glad. This couldn't have gone on much longer. It's made me incredibly sad."

"How do you think *I* feel?" Emily exclaimed.

"I wasn't sure. I had to take the chance."

"So you *are* the one who not only stole my mail but started sending it back?"

"I *am* that one."

"Well, I haven't much time, make your demands!"

"No demands and, in many ways, no explanations. I'll try. I see you have some of the letters with you."

"I have indeed!"

"The letter on the top, the first one, dated June 4th, 1935. Would you mind opening it? Just hold it where I can't read it, and let me speak, yes?"

"If you insist."

"No. I ask you very quietly."

Emily fumbled the letter out onto her lap.

"Well?" she said.

"Just this," he said, and shut his eyes and began to recite in a voice they could hardly hear:

"My dearest dear Emily—"

Rose sucked in her breath, as did her sister.

The old man waited a moment, eyes shut, and then repeated the words signed across the inside of his eyelids:

"My dearest dear Emily. I know not how to address you or pour out all that is in my heart—"

Emily let her breath out, as did her sister.

The old man paused and continued:

"—I have admired you for so many months and years, and yet when I have seen you, when we have danced or shared picnics with your friends at the lake, I have found myself unable to speak—"

His voice went on and on, now rising, now falling.

“—but now at last I must speak my tenderest thoughts or find myself mad beyond salvation—”

Rose took out her handkerchief and applied it to her nose. Emily took out hers and applied it to her eyes.

His voice was soft and then loud and then soft again, with a gentle cadence:

“—and the thought of anything more than that, the merest kiss, shakes me that I dare to put it in words—”

He finished, whispering:

“—until that hour and that day, I send you my affections and kindest thoughts for your future life and existence. Signed William Ross Fielding. Now. Second letter.”

Emily opened the second letter and held it where he could not see it.

“Dearest dear one,” he said. “You have not answered my first letter, which means one of several things: You did not receive it, it was kept from you, or you received, destroyed it, or hid it away. If I have offended you, forgive—”

Emily opened a third letter and hearing this, eyes shut, he recited its contents:

“Everywhere I go, your name is spoken. Young men, friends, speak of you. Young women tell rumors that soon you may travel by ocean liner away . . .”

“They did that, in those days,” said Emily, almost to herself. “Young women, sometimes young men, sent off for a year to forget.”

“Even if there was nothing to forget?” said the old man, reading his own palms spread out on his knees.

“Even then. Go on. Letter number four?”

“I would rather. Here.” He handed over a small packet. “The last letter.”

She opened the bottom letter. Her eyes grew wet as she read the lines and heard him, head down, speak them quietly from remembrance.

“Dearest dear love, do I dare say it, love of my life? This is the last time I will write. I know that you are leaving tomorrow and will not return until long after Christmas or New Year’s. Your engagement has been announced to someone already in Paris, waiting. I wish you a grand life and a happy one and many children. Forget my name. Forget it? Why, dear girl, you never knew it. Willie or Will? I think you called me that. But

there was no last name, really, so nothing to forget. Remember instead my love. Signed W.R.F.”

Finished, he sat back and opened his eyes as she folded the letter and placed it with the others in her lap, tears running down her cheeks.

“Why,” she asked at last, “did you steal the letters? And use them this way, sixty years later? Who told you where the letters might be? I buried them in that coffin, that trunk, when I sailed to France. I don’t think I have looked at them more than once in the past thirty years. Did William Ross Fielding tell you about them?”

“No,” said the old man, troubled with his breathing. “I *am* William Ross Fielding.”

There was an incredibly long silence.

“Let me look at you.” Emily leaned forward and he raised his head into the light. “No. I wish I could say. Nothing.”

“It’s an old man’s face now,” he said. “No matter. When you sailed around the world one way, I went another. I have lived in many countries and done many things, a bachelor traveling. When I heard that you had no children and that your husband died, ten years ago, I drifted back to this, my grandparents’ house. It has taken ten years to nerve myself to find and send this best part of my life to you.”

The two sisters were very still. You could almost imagine that you heard their hearts beating. The old man said, at last:

“What now?”

“Why,” said Emily Bernice Watriss Wilkes slowly. She handed the packet back. “Every day for the next two weeks, send the letters. One by one.”

He looked at her steadily. She met his gaze.

“And then?” he said.

“Oh God!” she said. “I don’t know. Let’s see.”

“Yes, yes. Indeed. Let’s say goodbye.”

Opening the front door, he almost touched Emily’s hand, but stayed himself.

“My dear dearest Emily,” he said.

“Yes?” She waited.

“What—” he said.

“Yes?” she said.

“What,” he said, and swallowed. “What . . . are you . . .”

She waited.

“Doing tonight!?” he finished, quickly. ●

800-Pound Gorilla

by Henry Slesar

There were few people prowling the cold, dawn-lit streets of the upper east side, but at Eighty-first and Park there was a giant simian. Its knuckles barely scraped the sidewalk as it pushed open the front door of the building, just unlocked by the morning man, who emerged from the utility room with pail and mop in time to see the gorilla lope towards the front elevator. Fortunately for the intruder, the building man spotted the object in the animal's hairy hand before sounding an alarm. It was a fifty-dollar bill.

The rest was constructed by the police, mostly by Lt. Rueben Santos, in response to the frantic call from Kenneth Wright, later identified as a "close friend" of Mrs. Terri Sacher.

"Terri Sacher," the Captain said, staring at Santos across the desk. "Now why does that

name sound familiar?"

"Tabloids," the lieutenant answered. "Big money divorce action. Not big enough to make the front page, but it has now." He held up an early edition of the *Post*. The black headline read: "HUSBAND GOES APE—SHOT AND KILLED BY TERRIFIED WIFE."

The *Post* reporter had done Santos's job for him. The story inside was as good an account of the following events as he could have written himself.

February 19. *It must have seemed like a delicious prank to John Sacher, billionaire husband of the former model Terri Hicks. The night before, encountering his estranged wife at the exclusive Elsinore Club in the company of her friend Kenneth Wright, Mr. Sacher, described by witnesses as "very intoxicated," tried to force her to dance with him.*

Mrs. Sacher resisted forcibly, struck him across the face, and called him "a big ape!"

Early this morning, John Sacher donned a gorilla costume, and calmly took the elevator to his own apartment. Still in possession of a key, he let himself in quietly and tiptoed into the bedroom where his wife was sleeping. Opening the window to make it appear that he had scaled the building King Kong-fashion, he then emitted a terrifying roar. Sacher had anticipated her frightened reaction, but he had not been prepared for her response. Since their separation, his wife had decided to keep a small gun in the nightstand drawer. She seized it and pumped three bullets into the body of the "beast" which had broken into her home. John Sacher was killed instantly.

It was more than an hour later, after the distraught woman had managed to reach her friend Kenneth Wright, that the police were called to the chilly scene. Rigor mortis had already set in, so the ape costume had to be cut away, re-

vealing the dead body of the man who had played his last practical joke.

"I'll tell you the real joke," Santos grunted. "Mrs. Sacher won't have to fight for her husband's money in court now. She'll get it all, and nobody will blame her."

"That's what I call a real lucky woman," the Captain said. "She's practically getting away with murder."

Santos had gone for a coffee refill. Now he paused with his hand on the tap.

"What's the old joke, Captain? About the 800-pound gorilla?"

"Where does an 800-pound gorilla sleep? Anywhere it wants to."

Santos returned to the desk, his eyes gleaming.

"Guess what? I know where this 800-pound gorilla slept last night. And it's going to send Mrs. Terri Sacher to prison!"

What was Lt. Santos's solution to the mystery? Turn to page 54 for "The Final Paragraph."

DYING FOR LOVE

by Barbara Owens

She was becoming a Saturday night regular at the bookstore where I worked. Always bought a throwaway paperback, a time killer, the sure sign marking all lonely hearts who have spaces to fill and no one to belong to. You wouldn't call her pretty, but her eyes drew me. They held bitterness and confusion—this girl had been wounded and couldn't understand why. I knew that feeling well.

She seldom spoke to anyone and she never smiled. Still, I started looking forward to her weekly visits. I wanted to know her.

Finally, on one wet Saturday, I elbowed fat Rob away from the register when I saw her approaching with her latest selection. "I'll take this one," I said.

"Hey, man!" Rob protested, but he stepped back with a knowing grin.

"Hi." I smiled, taking the book from her. "Find something good for a rainy night?"

Her look swept my face, recording it. She nodded.

"My name's Jay," I told her. "I've noticed you in here before. Nice to meet a fellow reader. Not enough of us around anymore."

The look flattened. "I'd assume everyone you meet in here is a reader," she said drily. "It's a bookstore."

The old familiar uncertainty jerked awake inside me, but I held on to my smile. "Just trying to be friendly," I said. "No offense."

"Both the funny story and the mystery story," *EQMM* author James Powell once said, "travel down a strongly plotted road, all the while preparing the reader for the punch line, the unexpected ending which he must instantly understand was the only ending there ever could have been." So true, as you'll see in Barbara Owens's new story, which forms a perfect circle beginning with its very first words. †

She watched me slide the book into a bag and some of her coolness seemed to fade. "Sorry," she said. "I'm in a bad mood. Nice to meet you, Jay. I'm Karen."

I leaped eagerly into the opening. "That's a nice name. Karen. You live close by?"

Again, too soon; I'd never learn. Her face shuttered. "Close enough," she said, turned, and left the store.

Rob snickered behind me. "That was good, Jay. Made a big impression."

He wasn't being cruel. Rob was a friend. He'd seen me through some very bad times and was always after me to exercise a little restraint. I tried, but I didn't always succeed. I'm just a hopeless romantic, one of those people who can't be happy without someone to love.

When she came in again the following week I was ready with an apology. "I hope you didn't think I was coming on too strong," I told her. "I was just trying to get your attention. You look like someone I'd like to know."

She seemed surprised and a little flustered. "That's okay," she said.

I took that as encouragement. "Look, we'll be closing in a while. Would you like to meet somewhere for coffee?"

I could almost see the walls slam around her. "Thanks, but I don't think so. I've got—it's not a good night for me."

She said no again on the next two Saturdays. On the third, however, she took time to think about it. She looked tired that night and her eyes were red. Too little sleep or too many tears. I'd been there, too.

"I'm not sure I'd be very good company," she said finally, leaving the door open for me to decide. I chose the coffee shop on the corner, and she said she'd meet me there when the store closed.

It felt terrific to see someone waiting for me when I walked through the coffee shop door. The place was quiet, dimly lit, and intimate. I felt so good that I reached out to squeeze her hand when I slid into the booth, but she moved it away. Her wary look was back. I thought of Rob. Cool it, he would say, so I did. Small talk at first.

We established that she was Karen Foley and I was Jay Win-

terhouse. She was originally from Ohio, had been in town a year, and worked for the phone company. Her job was okay, she said. I told her about growing up just a few blocks away, about going to college and dropping out after a year. She said she had wanted to go to college but her family couldn't afford to send her. I was an only child, she had two older brothers. I pulled out some amusing stories of life in the bookstore and eventually she smiled, showing far too much gum. She looked small and vulnerable. I told myself Karen Foley needed someone. Maybe that someone was me.

"So, is there someone special in your life?" I finally asked her when I thought it seemed safe. "It's hard to imagine someone like you without one."

She avoided my eyes, intent on the little paper napkin she was shredding. "Kind of," she said.

My heart went into a slow fall. "Want to tell me about him?"

Apparently she didn't. "How about you?" she asked instead.

"I did have." I couldn't stop the sigh. It still hurt to talk about Annie. "I'm coming back from a very low place right now. I thought I'd found heaven, but she didn't feel the same."

Karen's eyes filled and she ducked her head. I'd hit a nerve. Restraint, Jay, I reminded myself. The girl needs you but she doesn't know it yet. I tactfully switched the conversation to more mundane things, and when I eventually left her at her front door she said shyly, "Thanks for the coffee. I had a good time. You're very easy to talk to."

"I think I'm in love," I told Rob the next day. "I think this girl is the one."

He looked pained. "Oh God, Jay, haven't we been through this before? How many times? When will you learn? You know how you are."

"Not anymore," I assured him, believing it. "Something feels different this time. This is real."

Karen came in later than usual on the following Saturday, just before closing. She took her time at the racks, and every time I glanced at her she was watching me. Finally, I went to her, concentrating on restraint.

"You look nice tonight," I said softly. She didn't—she looked haggard and depressed, but she didn't need to hear that. I pride myself on my consideration.

She took a deep breath. "I was wondering if you'd like to come to my place after work for cake and coffee," she said abruptly.

It caught me by surprise. Karen must have thought my hesitation was a prelude to refusal, because her eyes darkened angrily and she turned away. "Never mind, you don't have to. Forget it. It's probably a bad idea."

"No," I said quickly, coming to my senses. "I want to come. Very much."

She tossed off a shrug. "It's just that it's my birthday. No big deal, but . . ." Her chin rose defiantly and she glared at me. "Look, don't get the wrong idea. I need a friend tonight, that's all. If you're after something else, consider the invitation off."

She looked so lost and defensive that I wanted to put my arms around her. If this girl would eventually allow me, I'd show her what real love was. But when the time came. Not yet. Restraint.

"That's fine with me," I said. "You know what they say—lovers come and go but a true friend can last a lifetime." She almost smiled. "I wish I had a present for you. I'd pick up some books from here, but I'm afraid you wouldn't come back next week if I did."

She did smile then, revealing that pink expanse of gum. "You're a lifesaver," she said.

I said, "Maybe we can save one another. Isn't that what friends are for?"

We didn't talk much during the short walk to her apartment, and once inside she seemed awkward and ill at ease. Her place was small, lacking the cheerful touches you'd expect from a working girl building her personal environment. The apartment had a tentative air, as though it was waiting to see what was expected of it. I thought it looked like a mirror of Karen's soul.

Her capacity for conversation waned when we started on the cake and coffee. I tried to carry on alone, dusting off more bookstore anecdotes, but I finally stopped when I saw tears shining in her eyes.

"Forgive me for saying so, but the guy's a real bastard, whoever he is," I said quietly. I was privately wishing I could get my hands on him, on any man who'd hurt a girl as much as he'd hurt her.

Karen shook her head fiercely. "I don't want to talk about him, okay?"

What she didn't understand was that she had to tell me. I needed to know. "He was supposed to be here tonight, wasn't he? For your birthday."

All I got was a stubborn stare. Okay, there were other ways to go about it. I'd learned early that sharing with a woman was the surest way to make her trust you.

"I think I understand something of what you're feeling," I told her. "Remember I said I'd just broken up with someone? Her name was Annie. What we had was so intense you wouldn't believe it. I had the house, the kids, our life together all planned in my head. I couldn't imagine a minute of my life without her. Is there any better feeling than that? Annie promised me it would never end, but it did, and I still don't know why. Suddenly it was simply over and she never wanted to see me or speak to me again. She tore the heart right out of me."

That wasn't exactly the way it happened, but close enough. Karen didn't need to know about all the times I tried to make Annie reconsider, how she made me so furious when she wouldn't listen to reason that I had to hit her. And how she had finally humiliated me by getting a restraining order against me. Or that Annie was only the last in a series of girls who'd sworn love to me and then pushed me away. It would serve no purpose to let Karen know that I was a man dying for love. Someday I'd tell her, after she had come to know how wonderful life can be when sharing it with the right man.

She was looking down at her plate, pushing crumbs from her untouched cake around it.

"Mine's married," she said softly. "Same old story. I didn't know it when I met him. After I found out he said he'd divorce her, but he didn't. I'm living a cliché. He wants to keep her and he wants me, too, but I always come in second. Yeah, he was supposed to be here tonight, but something came up at home." Her voice caught. "I've told him to go away and leave me alone, but he knows I don't mean it." Finally she looked up at me, misery in her face. "I can't help myself, I love him. What have I got left if I don't have him?"

Me! I wanted to shout. "Doesn't look like much of a future," I said instead.

"It isn't. And I'm tired of feeling terrible about it all the time."

"Who is he?"

She shook her head. "I can't tell you. His nickname's Buck, that's all I can say. Nobody knows about us, nobody at all; he's really strict about that. He's hiding me, you understand? I can't talk about him to anyone."

"You can talk to me," I said. "I won't tell. Look on me as your birthday present—a friend who cares."

It was her first unguarded smile. "That's a nice thought. My birthday friend."

I was very careful with her at first, always managing to be there anytime she needed me, or when I thought she needed me. I built a bookcase for all her paperbacks and talked her into buying some inexpensive prints to hang on the walls. We shopped together for colorful pillows and curtains, gradually turning her nondescript apartment into a home. I never touched her, never pushed her, and she relaxed, depending on me more than she knew.

"What would I do without you?" she kept saying. "Oh, Jay, you make me laugh. Thank you."

I listened to her continuing travails with Buck, and something in me delighted in the fact that I was welcome to come in her front door and be seen by her neighbors while he always sneaked in through a back entrance or met her somewhere distant.

"She's coming around," I told Rob. "I knew she would. Now that she knows how sympathetic and understanding I can be, I'm going to start on the good times. She never has any fun with him. That will be the clincher."

Rob looked dubious. "What do you know about this guy?" he demanded. "What if he finds out about you? I don't like it, Jay. The whole thing sounds like bad news to me."

"I know everything about him I need to. He's not important, don't you see? She's beginning to see how much better life is with me. Trust me, Buck is almost history."

We went to movies, to restaurants. I took her on a boat ride and on a picnic in the country. We walked and talked for hours on end, and Karen flowered.

"It's so nice to be out in public with someone," she said one day, squeezing my arm. "Buck and I can never do that. He's always afraid we'll be seen. He never takes me anywhere."

How I wanted to touch her then, but I didn't. "That's no way to live, Karen," I said softly.

Her look showed me a new thoughtfulness. "I know it isn't," she said. We were on our way home from a day at the zoo. "I'm beginning to understand that. I had more fun with you today than I ever had with him."

I thought my heart might break into song. "Well, it doesn't have to end," I said. "There's a whole life out there waiting to have fun with. We really enjoy each other's company, don't we?"

"I don't know, Jay," she murmured, but the tone of her voice was husky, more intimate. Something was definitely happening between us.

"I've almost got her!" I exulted to Rob. "No doubt about it. This is the girl I've been waiting for."

"Be careful, Jay," was all he said.

I bought her a silly little gift to celebrate our one month of friendship. It brought tears to her eyes.

"You are so thoughtful," she told me. "You really make me feel special. Even Buck's noticed how different I am lately."

"Have you told him about me?" I asked.

She shuddered, the glow in her eyes fading. "God, no, I'd be scared to. He doesn't want me to have anyone in my life but him."

I took her hand that day and she didn't pull it away. "Karen, you know that's not right. What are you going to do about it?"

"I have to think," she said plaintively. "I have to be sure."

On one cool spring evening we went to a rock concert at an outdoor arena. Karen looked like a teenager in her jeans and denim jacket. I wore my old high-school letter jacket, and we decided we were both too cool that night to be grown up so we wouldn't be. We drank beer, danced, and screamed until we were hoarse. When we got back to her place, a little unsteady on our feet, she looked so bright-eyed and happy that I said to hell with restraint and kissed her. She looked startled for a minute, then kissed me back, and before we knew it our clothes were on the floor and we had become more than friends.

I dozed off, feeling like a king, waking later in the dark to the sound of Karen crying. She was huddled on the side of the bed, and I was struck dumb when the first thing she said to me was to put on my clothes and go home. She sounded on the verge of hysteria.

"This never should have happened!" she shouted at me. "What have you made me do? I'm not in love with you, I love Buck! Just go, Jay. Leave and don't come back. Everything's ruined now."

She wouldn't listen to me, wouldn't let me tell her how I'd loved her from that first night in the coffee shop, how I would care for her and cherish her for the rest of her life.

"And you love me, too, you know you do!" I shouted back at her.

She was ugly with her face all twisted like that. "I don't! I don't love you and I never could. Tonight was a mistake! Just get out. I don't ever want to see you again."

And here I'd just been so happy, so content. I hit her hard enough to knock her down, and when she came back at me, clawing my face, I hit her again, much harder. The next thing I knew I was running through dark streets, untied shoelaces flapping around my feet. I remember I was crying because it had happened again. I had thought I'd found the love I was dying for and something had gone wrong.

By morning, however, I had talked myself into looking on the bright side. The scratches on my face could pass for shaving nicks, so I went to work as usual, planning the approach I would use to win her back. We'd both had too much to drink, that was all. I could still make her see that our union was meant to be. She wasn't lost yet.

The two men came into the store just before noon. Rob's eyes were as big as plates when they took me away. I was in shock. Karen was dead. Neighbors had been concerned about the fight overheard in her apartment the night before, loud voices and the sounds of a struggle, and when one of them knocked on her door early that morning and she didn't answer, the authorities were called. She had been beaten to death. My Karen was gone.

It was only after the detectives arrived with me at the police station that I realized they thought I had killed her. They talked to me in a small room there while others searched my apartment. I kept insisting that I couldn't have done it, that I loved her, but it was obvious they didn't believe me. I had been seen leaving her apartment, half-dressed and obviously upset, and I had also been identified as the man seen in

her company for several weeks. Karen Foley was an unusually solitary tenant—she had no other friends.

"You admit you hit her, right?" the smaller detective asked me. "You're a pretty big guy and she was a very small girl. How many times did you hit her, Jay?" He had told me his name was Edwards, and he didn't act like he cared much for me.

"We—we had a little quarrel," I told him. "I may have slapped her a couple of times, but I didn't hit her hard enough to kill her." I suddenly wasn't sure, though.

"Well, she's dead," the bigger detective, Lipsky, said. "You say you hit her and here you sit with scratches on your face. What are we supposed to think?"

"I don't know. It was just a—just a little argument."

They acted as if they were waiting for something, and finally it came. Another big detective entered the room carrying my letter jacket. It had my name sewn into it and it had been found in my apartment, crusted with dried blood. The new detective told me that a simple test would determine whether or not the blood was Karen's.

He had eyes like blue ice. He introduced himself as Detective Webber and told me that he himself had discovered the jacket hidden in the back of my closet.

"So we know you were there last night, and we know you had a fight and hit the girl. This is your jacket, right? From the looks of the blood on it I'd say you must've hit her pretty hard." He looked at me as if he hated me. "Come on, Jay, let's stop playing games. Why don't you tell us about it?"

I couldn't think straight. What was happening? Something wasn't right and I was too scared to pick out what it was. When Detective Webber leaned across the table at me I couldn't help myself—I cringed and leaned away.

"We know something else, too." He had a soft voice, but there was no warmth in it. "You have a habit of hitting women when you don't get your way, don't you? You're on our books, Jay. Does the name Ann Donato mean anything to you?"

My God. Annie. The restraining order was in their records. I could feel the ground open under me.

"I didn't kill her," I said, and it sounded like a lie even to me. "I hit her, but she was still alive when I left. Someone else—"

A jolt shook me. Someone else. "Listen, Karen had another boyfriend. He was married, but crazy jealous. She was afraid of him. Maybe he did it. Found out she was seeing me and killed her."

Webber's eyes turned even colder. "And what's this guy's name, this other boyfriend?"

"I only know his nickname. It was—"

I had been listening to Karen go on about him for weeks, and suddenly the name simply disappeared from my mind. I tried until I felt lightheaded and I couldn't bring it back. I wanted to cry, I felt so weak and helpless.

"I can't remember it. Karen couldn't say much about him. He made her keep their relationship secret. It was—" It simply wouldn't come. "Something like Duke or Lucky."

Detective Webber straightened slowly, held my jacket out and looked at it. Lipsky and Edwards smiled. "Yeah, sure," was all Webber said, and I knew at that moment I was gone.

Tests confirmed the blood on the jacket was Karen's, of course, and scrapings from under her fingernails showed traces of skin and blood that belonged to me.

The nickname wouldn't come back to me, no matter how I tried, but during the time I was awaiting trial I remembered something that hadn't seemed right when they questioned me.

I didn't remember wearing my jacket home that night. I had been trying to dress and Karen was screaming at me to leave—I know I didn't even take time to tie my shoes. I couldn't recall taking my jacket, but I thought I must have; it had been found in my closet, stiff with blood. For a while I thought I was losing my mind.

"I honestly don't believe I killed her," I told the attorney appointed to represent me. "I would remember if I had, wouldn't I?" The attorney was a woman, and she looked at me as if I were something stuck on the sole of her shoe.

The evidence against me was mostly circumstantial, but it kept piling up until I was buried under it. Everything pointed to me. Karen's neighbors identified me as the only one ever seen with her. Her coworkers at the phone company said she never talked about going anywhere or doing anything with anyone but me. My past record was allowed to be presented in court, and one day there was Annie herself, testifying how I had struck her and harassed her until she had to take legal

action to keep me away from her. Just seeing her made me love her all over again, even saying all those terrible things about me.

Even Rob, obviously distressed, related from the witness stand that I had a history of going off the deep end over every woman who gave me encouragement, and he stressed that he had warned me not to initiate a relationship with Karen Foley. He said I had told him about her married boyfriend, but he couldn't recall the name.

I testified, too, but what could I say? Only that I didn't do it, that I had loved her.

Detective Webber was the one who closed the cell doors behind me. A young, respected officer with a distinguished career, he was sincere and professional on the stand, and he made the evidence against me impossible to refute. He painted me as weak and evil, preying on lonely, unsophisticated women. When he described what was left of Karen after I finished with her, no one in the courtroom doubted that he, a seasoned police officer, had been shaken by the sight. When Webber was finished, so was I. Because of the extreme brutality of the crime, the death penalty was handed down and Webber smiled.

Rob was the only one who came to see me in jail, and he came just once. "I tried to warn you, Jay," he said sadly. "Remember that I tried."

So I came to Death Row, still unable to believe it. Several inmates here know of Webber, and most of them speak of him with a certain regard.

"You just run out of luck when you came up against him," one told me several days ago. "You was done for as soon as he got his teeth into you."

"He's good?"

"None better. And I don't usually say this about cops, but he's an okay guy, too. You got a fair shake, Winterhouse. One thing Buck Webber is, is honest. Some of those guys will frame a man like you wouldn't believe."

I haven't been able to think about anything else since. It screams inside my head night and day. Now everything makes sense. Buck. He must have gotten to Karen's apartment right after I left and somehow made her tell him what had hap-

pened. Karen said he'd kill her if he found out about me. Poor Karen. She was right.

Then he grabbed my jacket, soaked it in her blood, and managed to plant it in my closet when he went to search my apartment the next day. He's a cop—he'd know how to do those things.

And there's nothing I can do about it. All I know is a nickname told to me by a dead woman, a nickname I'd forgotten until now. He certainly was careful—there's no other connection to her. And who would believe me? My word against his—Buck Webber, honest cop and damn fine man.

So it's all over for me. He's out there raking in congratulations and I'm in here, a living dead man without enough restraint. And all because the only thing I ever wanted was someone to love. ●

DETECTIVERSE

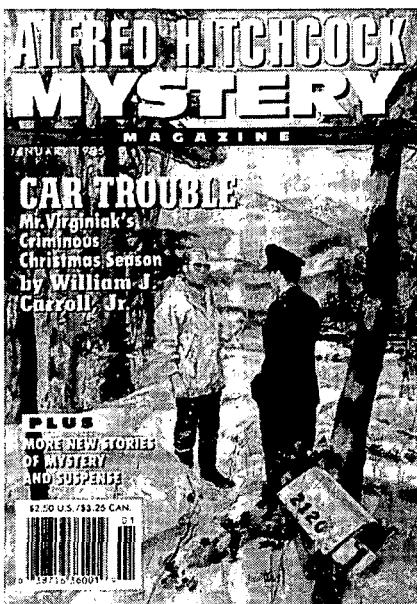
Icecapades

by Jack Tinkle

Thieves fall out and quarrels do sprout
After many a bountiful heist.
They fight and mangle, often strangle,
For gems incalculably priced.

'Twere better, methinks, if after high jinks,
They divvy while making nice.
For cops acallin' because of the brawlin'
Will soon uncover the ice.

SOME
PEOPLE
WOULD
KILL...



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MTAH2



WHAT GOES ROUND COMES ROUND

by Hitoshi Igarashi

1.

Toshio Kamijo paused as he fastened his tie to listen to a cicada crying from a tall willow in the garden of his house in the exclusive Shoto area of Tokyo. At forty-five he was in his prime, but he could not remember the last time he had stopped to enjoy the sounds of nature.

His summer holidays were always spent abroad and he had enjoyed exploring the world with numerous women companions. He was the president of a real-estate company, but he had never, in his worst dreams, imagined that the bubble economy would burst and wipe out everything he had worked for.

It was Tuesday, August the sixteenth, and he rose late to eat breakfast with his young wife Mayumi before getting ready to go to his office in Shibuya. His company dealt solely in real estate and there was little to be gained by hurrying in to work. Sales of houses and apartments were at a total standstill and the only people who came to see him these days were from banks or other financial institutions, demanding payment on overdue loans.

"Toshio! Toshio!"

Mayumi's voice rang out through the house as she rushed into the room, her well-formed breasts threatening to spill out of the top of her white blouse at any moment. Her face was white and her full lips trembled as she spoke.

"Mamiko is gone," she said and held out a piece of paper about the size of a postcard for him to read. "Mamiko was not in her cot but I found this lying there instead."

Toshio had already finished changing into a summer suit, and realizing that something was wrong, he snatched the paper from her hand.

"What do they mean . . . 'We've got Mamiko'?!" His voice rising at least an octave then, he hurriedly read the rest of the note. "Prepare thirty million yen in used notes and leave in a paper bag on the luggage rack by the last door on the right-hand side of the 18:02 train from Shibuya to Kichijoji tomorrow evening. If you do not go to the police and we receive the money safely, the child will be released within a few hours."

We find several examples in the history of *EQMM* that literary talent runs in families. Brothers Doug and Jim Allyn, father and son Peter and Philip Lovesey, and mother Helen Reilly and her two daughters Mary McMullen and Ursula Curtiss. Two Japanese siblings, Shizuko Natsuki and Hitoshi Igarashi also write for us. Ms. Natsuki is one of Japan's best-known crime writers; her brother, Mr. Igarashi, won one of his country's distinguished mystery-fiction prizes, the Yokomizo Seishi Award, in 1994. †

The note was written on cheap paper with a ballpoint pen and the handwriting was obviously disguised.

They looked at each other in silence for a moment then ran out of the bedroom and back to the nursery. The cot was empty, and the mobile that hung above it turned forlornly in the breeze from the garden.

The strength seemed to fade from his legs and Toshio sat down heavily on the floor, clasping his head in his hands. He realized that he was in serious trouble.

"Do you think they'll hurt Mamiko?" Mayumi demanded, her breathing becoming ragged as she grasped Toshio's narrow shoulders and shook him. He was over twenty years her senior and she looked to him for comfort.

"There's no denying that this is serious, but I don't think we need worry about that. They have nothing to gain by hurting her, so I'm sure they will look after her." He had his first child late in life and it made her all the more precious to him. She was still only twelve months old and he could not imagine anyone wanting to harm her.

"Please say you won't call the police," Mayumi pleaded. "You can find the money somehow, can't you?"

No matter how she begged him, he remained silent. Ever since the collapse of the economy he had had a nagging fear that something like this might happen. It was bad enough to have his daughter kidnapped like this, but what really frightened him was that he might not be able to find the money for the ransom. At the height of his career he made deals that were worth billions of yen, but now even a few million was beyond his reach. Ever since he had failed to pay the interest on a loan, the financial organizations had all closed their doors to him and, as a result, not only his company properties, but even his own house and possessions had been mortgaged to the hilt.

What would people say if he was unable to raise a mere thirty million in ransom? The kidnap was disaster enough, but what scared him more was the loss of face he would suffer if he failed to pay. His worst dreams had come true.

"Don't worry, I will get the money somehow and I won't call in the police."

He was not nearly as confident as he sounded, but his first priority was to calm Mayumi down.

He had always lived very well, and even after he lost his money, he had been careful to keep up appearances, so it was easy to understand why the kidnappers should pick on him. However, he cursed himself for not having been more careful.

"Anyway, I must go out now, I have to sort out the money situation today."

He had no idea what he was going to do, but he hurried off towards the garage.

"I hope it goes well. If anything happens to Mamiko it will mean the end of everything."

He did not know what Mayumi meant, but he realized the truth of what she said. If he did not manage to get Mamiko back safely, he would probably lose everything he had.

2.

Toshio rushed about town in his car, almost having two traffic accidents on the way. He visited two banks, two trust companies, and two other financial institutions, and even though he concentrated on people he was friendly with, none of them could see their way to letting him have a loan for a further thirty million yen.

If he had explained his situation to them, they would probably have behaved differently, but he did not know what was going to happen yet, so he decided to keep the kidnapping secret for now.

The banks all closed their shutters at three o'clock and so he turned his car towards Nampeidai where his friend Hiroshi Gotoda lived.

"Time for plan two," he muttered to himself, but he did not stop outside the Gotoda house; instead he continued until he arrived at the shopping street by the station and left his car among the other illegally parked vehicles there. He walked back in the hot afternoon sun for five or six minutes until he reached the Gotodas' garden. He glanced briefly around him, then slipped into the garden through a gap that was formed where the wall stopped and a hedge began.

Gotoda's son lived in a new house that had been built in a corner of the garden. Toshio stood for a minute or two but the house seemed deserted in the afternoon heat, so, sliding open one of the screen doors, he climbed up into the corridor inside, not bothering to stop and remove his shoes.

When he came out again he had removed his suit jacket and was holding a baby inside it. He went out to the street through the same gap in the garden wall and hurried back to his car. He laid the sleeping child on the passenger seat, then started his car and drove to the nearest entrance ramp to the expressway and headed out of Tokyo in a westerly direction.

Approximately one and a half hours later, Toshio Kamijo pulled up outside the front door of the Gotoda house.

"Hello, it's Toshio, is anyone home?"

Hiroshi Gotoda hurried out to meet him, looking drawn and worried.

"Toshio, am I glad you're here."

He led him in, past the reception room where he usually entertained guests and through to a lounge at the back of the house. It was a large Japanese-style room with a carpet on the floor and sofas laid out to sit on. His son Takeshi, and his daughter-in-law, Kanako, were both sitting there looking very serious.

"You're a godsend. We couldn't call anyone and didn't know what to do."

Gotoda was also in the real-estate business but he had unloaded his properties before the crash and recently he'd tended to look down on Toshio rather, but not today. He led him into the room and sat him on the sofa in the center.

"What on earth is the matter?"

Gotoda was sixty years old, fifteen years older than Toshio, and brushing his silver hair back from his face, which was heavily tanned from golf, he grimaced and said:

"Somebody has kidnapped my grandson."

"What?! You mean Shinji?"

Gotoda nodded in reply and his son Takeshi, who managed one of his father's condominiums, took up the story.

"Yes. We only realized about an hour ago. We left him to have a nap and he disappeared. This note was left there in his place. . . ."

He snatched the note from his wife, who was sitting vacantly at his side, and handed it to Toshio. Gotoda's wife had died several years earlier, so apart from Takeshi's younger brother, who was an office worker and lived separately, this was the entire Gotoda family.

"But that's terrible, let me have a look."

Toshio had been careful not to leave any fingerprints on the paper when he placed it in the cot, but he could not be sure and so he made a point of handling it a lot.

"Hmmm . . . I see." The note was worded exactly the same as the one that he had received, except that the baby's name had been changed from Mamiko to Shinji. "So what have you done?" Toshio asked Gotoda with a strained expression.

"I haven't done anything really. I just made sure that the money would get here on time. The bank will be delivering it tomorrow morning."

"You haven't been to the police then?"

"Of course not, what's thirty million yen when Shinji's life is at stake?"

He still could not overcome his fears though and, exchanging a look with his son, he heaved a heavy sigh.

Suddenly the sound of sobbing filled the room. Kanako could not stand the strain and had broken into tears.

"Don't worry, Kanako, your father-in-law is doing everything possible. If you like, I will go with Takeshi tomorrow and make sure that the money is delivered to the kidnappers safely."

She was still sobbing loudly and was so tense that she seemed on the verge of a fit, but she seemed comforted by his kind words.

"If they hurt the child, it will only make their punishment worse when they are caught. Don't worry, they will be taking good care of Shinji."

3.

Terayama, in Hadano, is a rich agricultural area and it is hard to believe that it is less than fifty kilometers from Tokyo. A number of red-roofed buildings can be seen dotted among the vegetable and mulberry fields on the gently sloping land, and these belong to the Sagami Children's Home, an orphanage run by the Catholic Church.

Despite Japan's recent prosperity, there are still a lot of children who are brought up without knowing their parents. The Sagami Children's Home is run with money from American charities and it devotes itself to the raising of children until they finish their compulsory education.

"Sister, Sister, come quickly, there's an abandoned child!"

One of the local farmer's wives who worked in the home during the day rushed through to the principal's office. "Sister, a tiny

baby has been left in front of the gate. It's wrapped in a cheap sheet and crying."

"An abandoned child?"

The principal was an American nun and her Japanese was still not fluent, but she soon grasped what the woman was trying to tell her. She jumped to her feet and hurried out of the office. It was only twenty or thirty yards to the front gate, but it was a scorching day and she was perspiring freely by the time she arrived there. The farmer's wife proceeded a little more sedately and by the time she arrived, the principal had already picked up the baby that had been lying in what little shade there was to be found and was holding him in her arms.

"What is written here?" she asked, passing her a slip of paper which had been tucked into the child's white pajamas. She could not read Japanese.

The farmer's wife was rather short-sighted and held the paper up to her eyes as she started to read in an excited voice.

"I cannot raise this child anymore. Forgive me for being such a bad mother. Please look after my baby.' That's all it says, no, just a minute, there is something else there." The principal was very tall and the farmer's wife had to stand on tiptoe to reach into the baby's sheet and pull out a small object wrapped in tissue paper. "It's money, there's one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . fifty thousand yen. It must have been all the money the poor woman could find and she left it for us to use on the child." Her voice cracked slightly as she smoothed out the creases in the money.

"Anyway, let's get the child indoors and give it some milk," the principal said, changing her grip on the baby, then leading the way back through the garden and into the orphanage building.

The child was a boy and they estimated that he was probably three to four months old, which made him the youngest of the forty children in their care. The principal had a cot made up next to the nurses' room for him.

"The sheet he was wrapped in was of very cheap material, but his clothes are excellent quality," the farmer's wife said with admiration as she rubbed the soft, clean material between her fingers. "The mother must have felt that she owed it to her child to give him the best she could afford."

There was no way she could understand the emotions that went through the mind of the woman as she decided to give her

child away, but just the thought of it was enough to bring a lump to her throat.

"We will have to inform the authorities eventually, but I think we should wait a little before we do. The woman who left him might decide she wants him back. The Lord will not want her to make this mistake and we must pray that He will guide her steps to us." She spoke with confidence. "If he stays with us for long, we will have to think of a proper name for him, but in the meantime we will call him Peter."

Being a Catholic nun, it was natural for her to choose the name of one of the apostles.

4.

"Don't worry, everything is arranged," Toshio said confidently when he got back to his house in Shoto.

"So you'll be able to give the kidnappers the money tomorrow?" She looked quite haggard with worry even after such a short time, but he could sense the relief in her voice and she even managed a wan smile. "I knew you could do it."

Since his business had fallen upon hard times she had tended to look down on him a bit, but today things were different. She realized now that he was a man she could rely on and hugged him warmly.

"I was terrified that you would not be able to get the money and I didn't know what I would do if you couldn't. I realize now how silly I was. I should have known you would sort things out."

She stood back for a moment and looked closely at his face, as if seeing him for the first time, then kissed him passionately.

When his business had been at its peak, Mayumi had virtually driven his previous wife, Keiko, away. She had been able to provide Toshio with the child his previous wife could not produce, and as a result, he was totally besotted with her.

"I wonder what Mamiko is doing now," she said as she broke away from him. "It won't be long now, you only have to wait a little longer." Now she knew that everything was arranged, she managed to sound quite bright again as she called out to her missing daughter.

"There's nothing to worry about. This time tomorrow night she will be back with us again. I will meet all of the kidnappers' demands, so they will soon let her go," Toshio said comfortingly

as he put his arms around her. "Come on, cheer up. Everything that can be done has been done."

The bedroom door stood open in front of him. He had been kept at the Gotoda house for some time and had eaten dinner there so he was not hungry, and his wife's tear-stained face seemed sexier than ever to him. Perspiration beaded the cleavage between her breasts, and looking down, he could see her nipples. He pushed her backward until they reached his bed, the smell of her exciting him even more.

It is strange, but funerals or disasters tend to heighten sexual desire and while he did not consciously think of making another child just in case anything happened, he pushed his beautiful young wife back onto the bed.

5.

When he boarded the train with the ransom money, he soon realized why the kidnapper had specified the 18:02 train from Shibuya station. The station was packed with office workers and students hurrying to get home, and inside the train there was not an inch to spare. The money was wrapped in brown paper and Gotoda's son, Takeshi, put it on the luggage rack of the last carriage as instructed. Although the train was crowded, most of the passengers were commuters, so there was very little luggage on the racks.

Takeshi stood by the parcel, but the crush of passengers soon forced him into the center of the carriage. Toshio, who had volunteered to go along with him, remained on the platform until the last minute, keeping a watchful eye out for anything suspicious. A tape recording announced the departure of the train and the warning bell rang. People were spilling out of the open doors of the last carriage when Toshio struggled to get in and he was getting desperate when one of the station staff pushed from behind and the doors grudgingly slid closed.

The brown paper package was still on the shelf above the packed mass of humanity. The train entered a short tunnel then pulled into Shinsen Station. There was a lot of getting on and off, but when the train started again, it was, if anything, even more crowded than when it left Shibuya. The train remained packed for the next two stations until it arrived at Shimokitazawa.

The moment the doors on the right-hand side of the carriage opened, the people surged out and as they did so, Toshio saw a

hand reach up and take the parcel off the rack. He was still trapped behind the pressure of people on the opposite side of the carriage and could not see very well, but he got the feeling that it was a slim, white, woman's hand that took the ransom. He did not see her face or figure, but he thought that the slender hand emerged from a blue woman's blouse.

"Takeshi! Takeshi!"

Toshio called out to Gotoda's son, who by this time had been pushed up to the middle of the carriage, and the two of them got off the train behind the other passengers.

"Did you manage to see who it was?" he asked.

"No, there was such a crush that I couldn't see anything." Far from seeing the kidnapper, Takeshi had not even seen the money being taken.

"It was a big man. I could not see his face but he had fat, hairy arms."

However, he added that he thought it would be better if they did not attempt pursuit, and Takeshi, who was very weak-willed for a thirty-year-old, was happy to agree.

The money having been picked up according to schedule, Takeshi and Toshio walked over to the opposite platform and took a train back to Shibuya. They caught a taxi from the station and when they arrived at the Gotoda house, they found Hiroshi and Takeshi's wife Kanako very depressed and worried. Hiroshi's younger son and his wife had come from their house in Omori and were looking very solemn.

"A man appeared at Shimokitazawa Station and took the money," Toshio announced in a satisfied tone.

"That's good. Thank you for your help."

"There's nothing to worry about, we just have to wait a little longer until we hear from them again." Toshio looked very confident and struck himself on the chest as if to say they should leave everything to him.

Although it was summer and the days were long, by seven o'clock dusk had begun to fall and still there was no contact from the kidnappers. The tension in the room was becoming unbearable when Toshio got up and walked through to the next room to telephone his wife.

The phone only rang once before Mayumi answered it.

"Yes, Kamijo speaking!"

She sounded so excited that he knew without asking that Mamiko must have come home.

"One of the staff from the local convenience store brought Mamiko back. She said that they found her wandering around the store on her own."

"So the kidnappers kept their word then . . ." He almost spoke this out loud, but remembering where he was, he looked back over his shoulder and lowered his voice. "Is she okay?"

"Yes, she's fine. I thought that she might have lost some weight, but not at all."

"That's great, it's all I wanted to hear. But remember, don't tell anyone about what's happened. I am still a little tied up here, but I will be back as soon as I can." He forced himself to keep his voice down and hung up. Being careful not to let the joy show on his face, he went back into the next room.

"You'd think we would have heard from them by now," he said to nobody in particular, then went out of the front door and down to the mailbox by the gate.

"There's nothing here," he said, slipping in a piece of paper he had taken out of his pocket then making his way back to the lounge.

Fifteen minutes later, Kanako rushed into the room, her eyes flashing with excitement.

"Look, it's a note from the kidnappers, I found it in the mailbox!"

She sang out the message that was written there.

"Shin is at the Sagami Children's Home in Hadano City, Kanagawa. They say that we must pick him up without saying anything about the kidnapping. It is in the same handwriting as the ransom note."

She was convinced of the note's authenticity and, holding it to her cheek for a moment, she went around and showed it to each of the men in turn.

6.

Takeshi took the keys to the Mercedes and he and Toshio set out to pick up the child. The note from the kidnappers had insisted that they not let the people in the orphanage know about the kidnapping, so Toshio was able to persuade the elder Gotoda to wait for them in the house, as it would look strange if the whole family were to troop out there. However, he was not able

to stop Kanako from getting into the car with him.

"When we get to the orphanage, I want you to leave all the talking to me," Toshio said. "We don't want the people there to get suspicious and call the police."

Of course, Toshio could not lead them straight to the orphanage so he left it to Takeshi, and almost an hour passed before the car pulled up at its gate. The three of them walked up to the building, relying on the moon and what little light escaped from the building to see their way. They guessed that the children must all be asleep as it was very quiet in the building.

"Good evening."

They had all seen the large white cross on the roof and so they were not very surprised when a nun came out to greet them.

"I'm sorry to bother you at this time of night," Toshio said, keeping the young couple behind him.

"What may I do for you?"

"I am afraid there has been a terrible mistake and I believe you have our baby in your establishment."

"Baby . . . ? You don't mean the baby that was left here yesterday afternoon?"

The nun was a Japanese, about forty years old, and her eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Yes, I am sure that is the one."

It would be suspicious if he were to sound too confident, so Toshio just agreed vaguely with what she said.

"In that case, I think I had better call the principal. Please wait here."

So saying, she left the three of them standing on the dark porch and hurried back into the building. She returned a short while later, leading a plump Western woman in a nun's habit. The woman's face reflected the severity of a woman in orders rather than the gentleness of a charity worker.

"Would you mind explaining exactly what is going on? We can talk in the next room."

She led them to a large chapel with a statue of Christ on the cross looking down on them with a tired expression. The principal offered them chairs, then sat down opposite with the other nun.

"Before we go into detail, perhaps you would like to tell me about the baby, its sex, age, what it was wearing?"

Obviously, she wanted to make quite sure that they represented the child's family and so she started with the basics.

"He is a four-month-old boy named Shinji. I am his mother." It was obvious that Kanako wanted to see her child as soon as possible. "He was wearing cotton gauze pajamas with a Mitsu-koshi department store label in them."

"And what did he have over those?"

Kanako was at a loss so Toshio jumped in to help her.

"I believe that when he went out, he was wrapped in something."

"In that case I think we can assume that there is no mistake." They had managed to pass the first hurdle. "Go and fetch the child," she said to the other nun. "Now, perhaps you would like to tell me the circumstances behind its being left here."

As soon as the other nun left, the principal looked at the three people in front of her severely.

"The truth is . . ."

Kanako would have told her everything without hesitation but Toshio managed to stop her and act as their spokesman.

"I am very sorry, I know it was a terrible thing to do, but Kanako here was so exhausted by raising the child that she had something of a nervous breakdown and left the baby here in front of your gates. She is very repentant and promises that it will never happen again so please forgive her and let her have another chance."

"What . . . !"

Kanako could not believe what she was hearing and was about to tell the whole truth when the nun returned with Shinji.

"Ahh, Shinji, Shinji, I thought I would never see you . . ."

As soon as she saw her son, she forgot about everything else.

"We will come again later to thank you properly," Toshio said with a deep bow then led the happy young couple out of the orphanage.

7.

It was the perfect crime!

Toshio complimented himself on his way home for having thought up and carried out such a flawless plan. Apart from getting his child back safely, he had also managed to make Hiroshi Gotoda indebted to him for his help. It would be some years before the real estate got moving again, but in the meantime, he could

rely on Gotoda to help him out financially now and again.

The only thing he had not allowed for was that Kanako had persuaded Takeshi to go to the police when they got back and tell them the whole story. She was very strong-willed and could not bear the thought of being blamed for deserting her own child any more than she could forgive the kidnapper for putting her through so much hell during the last two days.

They went to the Shibuya police station and reported that although they had got their child back safely, they had been the victims of a kidnapping. The story was picked up by the papers, and as a result, everyone knew about it.

Toshio was a bit worried about the police opening the case, but he was even more at a loss as to what he would tell his wife.

All the same, I'm really on the ball these days.

Mayumi watched the television reports in amazement, but he merely commented:

"The kidnappers are a greedy lot, I soon realized that they must have done a double kidnap."

"Yes, they must be terrible people to do the same thing twice like that. You know, I think it must be somebody else in the real-estate business who planned it."

Now that she had Mamiko back, she was able to admire the daring of the gang.

"All the same, we will not go to the police. We don't want them coming back for revenge."

Mayumi shrank back in horror and he noticed that she had developed a double chin recently.

"I agree. We have kept our side of the bargain to the full, and I am sure the kidnappers will realize it."

Toshio was not looking forward to being interviewed by the police over his part in handing over the ransom money, but he knew there was nothing to worry about and he was able to relax for the first time in ages.

"Is Mamiko asleep?"

"Yes. But there is no need to worry, I have double locked all the windows this time."

Mayumi reached over to him, her plump arms stretching out of the sleeves of her cotton kimono.

"All this excitement has made me think," she said. "I want another child. There is no way of telling what might happen in the future."

She took his hand and slipped it in through the opening of her kimono. His fingertips slid slowly up her thighs.

"Tonight is a good night," she said. "We can celebrate Mamiko's return by giving her a brother."

She seemed excited by her words and he could smell the sweet scent of her perspiration. He was still fully dressed when she straddled his lap and kissed him.

8.

Dear Toshio Kamijo:

I received the thirty million as arranged, but it would appear that there has been some funny business somewhere. It would seem that you arranged for somebody else to pay your ransom for you.

We had not realized until now how little you can buy with thirty million, and so we have another request to make of you. We returned Mamiko as promised, and now we want you to pay the thirty million ransom for her. Also, as a punishment for all the pain that was suffered by the other family, we will accept a further twenty million, making a total of fifty million yen.

Of course, we will not bother to kidnap Mamiko again, so please rest easy, there is no need for us to go to such lengths. We urge you to make sure that nobody hears about our demands because, as I am sure you will appreciate, you are the one who will be most inconvenienced if the case comes to light.

As you will not have a sponsor this time, we will allow you five days in which to find the money. It would show rather a lack of imagination if we were to use the same train again, so this time we want you to place the fifty million on the luggage rack of the last carriage of the 18:03 down train on the Shintama line from Shibuya. We hope for your sake that you do not forget.

It is only after people pay their dues that they find true happiness. You must buy your daughter back first before you set about building a happy home with your sexy young wife. ●

THE SPANISH WORD FOR DEATH

by Donald Olson

V

era had first suspected she was failing the grade as a wife when she and Franklin attended the opening of an art exhibit and went on to dinner at her husband's boss's apartment on Sutton Place. As they were getting ready for bed that night back in their suburban bungalow, Franklin had made a cutting remark about Vera's failure to contribute to the dinner-table conversation. Mildly hurt, she'd reminded him that she knew next to nothing about modern art and consequently any remarks she might have offered would have sounded hopelessly naive among so sophisticated a group.

"And Vera, my pet," said Franklin, unimpressed by her logic, "I know this sounds picky, but I do wish you wouldn't call me Frankie in front of people. It sounds—I don't know—common."

"Common?"

"I'd rather you called me Franklin, at least among our friends."

"Your friends, you mean. Face it, darling, we're not in their league, socially or financially."

"Must we broadcast that fact? I could have died when you started sputtering about the price of beef. Good God, Vera."

Donald Olson is steeped in the traditions of the North; for years he lived in a hundred-year-old house in New York state, and he has learned to restore antique furniture collected in his region. Yet in his fiction he often takes us south of the border, bestowing in his characters fragments of the wanderlust that sent him traveling the globe before settling down near his birthplace in New York. †

"I didn't sputter. But I know more about the price of beef than the value of a painting."

"Then it's wiser to remain silent."

"I did. I thought that's what you were objecting to."

This was the fundamental problem in their marriage, a difference of views about what mattered, what was important. It concerned Vera that they'd begun living beyond their means, and now there were other worries. Franklin suggested less often that Vera meet him in town for lunch. He'd acquired a secretary named Emerald whose voice Vera had grown to loathe; it dripped condescension whenever she called, ever more frequently, to announce that Franklin would be working late and not coming home for dinner.

Another thing: Vera wanted children but Franklin kept insisting the time was not right, for after seven years with the investment firm, Franklin's career seemed to have stalled. Perhaps his ambition outstripped his talents; he rarely talked business with Vera, although for the past few months he seemed always to be requiring her signature on one document or another, telling her they had to do with their personal investment program.

It came, therefore, as the most wonderful surprise when Franklin arrived home one day with news that it was high time they had a real vacation together. He'd been slaving too hard, he said, burning himself out. With the sort of smile Vera hadn't seen on his darkly attractive face since the early years of their marriage, he tossed her a bundle of brochures.

"Mexico?" she cried. "Are you serious?"

"You always said you'd like to see Mexico."

"But the cost. I'd settle for a couple of weeks in Florida."

"That's your trouble, Vera, always willing to settle for less." He said they'd be leaving in about a month, plenty of time for Vera to buy some decent clothes. "Spruce yourself up a bit, if you know what I mean."

If this remark cast a faint shadow over her pleasure she didn't let it show. Instead, she chose to regard this unexpected trip as a chance to regain something of what had been lost in their marriage over the past few years. Vera wanted Franklin to be proud of her and as she pondered how best to prepare herself for the trip, it came into her mind that nothing might impress Franklin more than if when they arrived in Mexico she could

astonish him by being able to speak the language. She'd had some Spanish in high school and with the aid of one of those language courses on tape available at the library, she thought it might be possible to give herself a crash course.

But then her friend Marsha had a better idea. When Vera confided her plan over coffee on Marsha's patio, she was pleased that her friend didn't laugh.

"Silly? Of course it's not silly. Can't you picture Franklin's face when you start rattling away in Spanish to the hotel clerk?"

"Franklin honestly doesn't believe I've got a skill in the world beyond cooking a pot roast and keeping a tidy house. And *he* hasn't a word of Spanish. If I could prove to him that I could do something he couldn't, well, it would do wonders for my ego. I don't know, though, in so short a time . . ."

Marsha snapped her fingers. "Wait a minute, this might not work, it's just a thought. There's this guy who's been working for us. Superb gardener. He's perfectly respectable, nice appearance, and not uneducated. *And* he's Mexican. Maybe he could give you lessons in his spare time. Earn himself a few extra bucks. Franklin wouldn't have to know anything about it."

Thus it came to pass that a few mornings later Vera shyly found herself admitting Enrique Prado into her living room and self-consciously explaining her predicament.

Enrique Prado smiled quite as shyly as Vera. He was rather tall for a Mexican, slim but strongly built, with olive skin and lustrous black hair, but with arrestingly blue eyes which gave to his features a peculiar attractiveness. He was perhaps in his thirties, slightly younger than Vera, neatly dressed and faultlessly polite, almost courtly. Vera was charmed. He revealed that he would be leaving town in a few weeks but in the meantime would be more than happy to give Vera Spanish lessons. To Vera it no longer seemed an impractical venture.

The lessons began the next afternoon. Vera was amazed at how readily much of what she thought she'd forgotten came back to her, while Enrique Prado proved himself an ideal instructor, exacting yet marvelously patient, and his admiration for Vera's quickness as a pupil inspired her with feelings of pride and self-confidence she'd never before enjoyed.

While never presuming to invade the privacy of Vera's thoughts, Enrique Prado seemed to betray an intuitive awareness of and sympathy for her deeper motive in desiring to learn

the language, so that she found herself responding more openly than she would have dared to do even with Marsha.

Occasionally he would disclose fragments of his own past. Vera learned that he came from an impoverished region of Mexico and had journeyed north with ambitions of bettering himself.

"And yet," Vera ventured to say, "you haven't stayed long enough in one place, it seems, to put down roots and build a future."

Enrique's blue eyes turned sad. He spread his hands. "Perhaps, señora, I do not yet know what it is I look for."

That his powers of intuition might be even stronger than Vera had assumed seemed borne out by a disturbingly perceptive remark as he warned her, in reply to a subtly revealing disclosure of Vera's: "You must not expect too much, señora, from this trip to Mexico."

"Too much?"

"Travel refreshes the eye, but it does not cure the loneliness in the heart."

Vera lifted her eyes to his. "Do I seem lonely, Enrique?"

He hesitated, as if not wishing to overstep the bounds of propriety. "Perhaps not lonely, but with a fear of loneliness. A fear of losing . . . something."

"My husband, you mean?"

"Forgive me, señora."

"No, that's all right. Maybe I am pinning too many hopes on this trip. And our lessons. I want him to be proud of me, you see. I want to show him I'm really not so—limited."

Indeed, she often wondered if the Spanish lessons might be no more than a pathetic whim. Was it likely this sole accomplishment would cause Franklin to see her suddenly in a new light? She laughed at the absurd vision: Franklin showing her off at cocktail parties and boasting, "Meet my wife Vera. She speaks Spanish." Still she persisted, hoping it might at least lead to an improvement in their relationship.

At that time it could not be said that Vera was conscious of enjoying a pleasure from her sessions with Enrique which was not purely intellectual, or that his arrival each day produced an excitement of the senses having nothing to do with her eagerness to learn, or that the sound of his voice inspired anything more than admiration for its musical cadence, its richness of timbre, its exquisite precision of diction. Quoting a line of poetry from

Garcia Lorca, Enrique made even the Spanish word for death—*muerte*—sound beautiful.

The visible signs of something happening within herself, however, Vera could not altogether hide.

"Done something different with your hair, Vera?" Franklin inquired one evening, and when she shook her head he shrugged. "No, it's nothing like that, I guess. Funny, though. There seems to be something different about you."

"Different?"

"I don't know. You seem less—mousey."

This backhanded compliment annoyed Vera. Submissive, yes, but she'd never thought of herself as being mousey. "Excitement, I guess, thinking about the trip. I've been reading so many books I feel I'm already an authority on Mexico. I do hope it won't be difficult—not knowing the language, I mean."

He scoffed at this. "No problem. I'm sure they'll speak English at the hotel."

"Oh dear, I hope we won't be spending all our time in a hotel."

"We sure as hell won't be wandering around in the boondocks."

"That might be fun," Vera said.

"Not my idea of fun."

Recalling how rapturously Enrique had extolled the primitive beauty of his own remote region of Mexico, Vera found herself imagining what it would be like to be taking the trip with Enrique instead of Franklin, then hastily brushed this disloyal thought from her mind. Still, she wished Franklin's attitude toward the trip were less blasé. Indeed, his manner had seemed more preoccupied than usual during the past couple of weeks, until one evening Vera was prompted to ask if he was worried about something.

"Worried?"

"You don't regret promising me the trip, do you? I mean, if we can't afford it, you know I'd be perfectly satisfied with something less extravagant."

"I'm sure you would," he replied. "And yes, we can afford it. God knows we don't live extravagantly in this dump."

Vera looked at him with wounded eyes. "Is that how you see our home? A dump?"

"Let's just say a Manhattan duplex would suit me better than a hovel in suburbia. One of these days . . . You know what Cranshaw said to me last time I asked for a raise? 'We're well aware

of your merits, Caplice. It's rather a pity you lack imagination.' Can you believe that?"

"I didn't know your job required imagination."

"Who knows what he really meant, stiff-necked old bastard." Again the malicious undertone. "One of these fine days they might just discover how much imagination I do have."

Inevitably, the lessons had to reach an end, the trip less than a week away. Vera's feelings were now frankly ambivalent; on the one hand she looked forward to their departure, while on the other she regretted the imminent loss of Enrique's company. Enrique's blue eyes—the heritage, he'd once said, of some distant conquistador—seemed to reflect Vera's wistfulness.

"You've done well, señora. Your husband will be proud of you."

"Let's hope. Somehow I don't seem to care quite so much as I did when we started. Funny, isn't it? Maybe I've proved something to myself at least."

"That is the important thing."

"I owe it all to you, Enrique, whatever the outcome."

For a moment their eyes met and then, hastily, with identical expressions of guilt, slid apart.

It was on the following day, as Enrique was about to take his leave, that the telephone rang. It was Marsha. Vera recognized her friend's crisis tone.

"Vera, is Enrique still there?"

"Yes."

"You'd better warn him. Two guys from the Immigration Service were just here. They're looking for Enrique."

"Whatever for?"

"It seems our Latin charmer is an illegal alien. Can you believe it? When they didn't find him at his room they came here. Someone told them he'd been working for us."

Vera could feel her heart thumping wildly. "Did you tell them he's here?"

"Hell no, I'm no fink. I like Enrique. I told them he worked for us for a few weeks then hit the road. You'd better get rid of him, or hide him, or do something."

Vera dropped the phone and stared at Enrique with stricken eyes. When she told him what had happened, he merely shrugged and spread his hands in a gesture of resignation.

"I suppose it had to happen, sooner or later. I must go, señora."

"No!" The word burst out without a moment's forethought. "No, you mustn't run away. They're bound to catch you. Let me think. Let me think."

"Señora, I do not wish to make trouble for you."

Vera gripped him by the arms, felt the tension in his muscles. "Listen to me, Enrique. You must stay out of sight. You can't go back to your room."

"I have no place else to go," he said wanly.

"Then you must stay here. No, no, not in the house. In the loft of the garage. There's a camp bed there. I can bring you food. Franklin never goes up there. You'll be safe for a few days."

The brooding anxiety melted from his face. His smile, seeming to convey more than mere gratitude, quickened Vera's heart. "Ah, señora," he murmured, "you always take the sadness from me."

For a long moment they stood face-to-face, looking deep into each other's eyes. Then Vera smiled and turned away. "Quick now, we've a lot to do."

Vera felt not even a breath of guilt for what she'd done, only a transcendent awareness of having for the first time in her life done something significant, something daringly out of character and richly satisfying. Beyond that she made no attempt to analyze her feelings or her actions.

It was now two days before their planned departure.

"Franklin," she said that evening, "I don't want to go."

"You *what*?"

Vera felt an uncanny sensation of standing outside herself listening to her own words. "I don't want to go. I've given it a lot of thought. You'd have a much better time without me, don't tell me you wouldn't. Besides, I think we need some time apart."

Franklin's face seemed to swell as it darkened. "Good God, I don't believe what I'm hearing. It's crazy. Of course you're going. It's all you've been talking about. Are you on drugs or something?"

"Or something. Anyway, I've changed my mind. I don't want to go. I can't go."

His lips twitched in a humorless smile. "Too bad. I'm afraid you must go, my dear. We both must go, and we can never come back."

"Never come back? Who's talking crazy now?"

He loosened the knot of his tie, rotated his head as if to free it of a lifetime's constraint. "You may as well hear it now. I've taken money from the firm. A great deal of money. More money than I could have earned in thirty years. Oh, don't look so shocked. I've simply used my imagination, something Cranshaw said I lacked. For months I've been milking funds and transferring the cash to an account in Brazil. That's where we're going after changing planes in Mexico. The account is in your name, Vera, as you'd know if you'd bothered to read the papers I've had you sign. So you see, you have no choice. You must go with me."

Appalled, Vera let this sink in and then said flatly, "And I thought I knew you."

"What you choose to do after we get to Brazil is up to you. Emerald will be joining us eventually. We already have some investment plans."

There were no Spanish lessons next morning, but they talked for hours, she and Enrique, sitting side by side on the narrow camp bed in the dusty, grubby loft of the garage, holding hands like two children hiding from the bogeyman. Lunchtime passed with neither of them giving a thought to food; Vera did not go back to the house until it was almost time to pick up Franklin at the station.

Pleased, but not really surprised by his wife's demeanor that evening, Franklin told her that he knew once she'd thought about it she would see the futility of opposing him, nor did he protest when she quietly demanded he explain each and every detail of his plan. It was her price for cooperating: She must know precisely how he'd embezzled those funds and how and where he had sequestered them in that South American haven for swindlers.

For the first time in years Franklin seemed to regard Vera with genuine admiration, as if finally she was demonstrating that breadth of vision he'd always accused her of lacking. As for Emerald, he assured Vera that she meant nothing to him personally, he'd only used her, that once Emerald had been paid off she would be out of their lives.

Vera's contempt for him was so enormous she had no trouble pretending to believe his lies.

When Franklin stepped off the commuter train on Friday afternoon Vera greeted him with a kiss, and the bad news.

"The airline called. Our flight's been delayed for three hours. It won't be taking off until midnight."

Franklin expressed only minor irritation, as if emotionally he was already somewhere up in the sky, swilling champagne and applauding the success of his criminal enterprise.

"I'm glad of the extra time," said Vera. "Gives me a chance to do some extra shopping."

"I'll come with you."

"No you won't. Marsha's meeting me at the mall. It'll be my last chance to see her."

"Well, for God's sake watch your tongue. And don't be late getting back. We should be at the airport by ten."

Vera's luggage was already in the car's trunk, the tickets and passports in her handbag. How thoughtful of Franklin, she thought with a smile, to have left her with the responsibility of hanging on to them. He was always misplacing things. As far as Franklin taking it into his head to call the airport himself, that was a chance she had to take.

Arriving at the airport, she parked the car, checked in her luggage, had a cup of coffee and a sandwich, and settled down in the terminal with a magazine. Still an hour to wait before it was time to meet Enrique in the departure lounge. She tried to dismiss from her mind all the things that could go wrong, such as the flight *really* being delayed. She foresaw no actual trouble about the passport. Enrique should be able to pass for Franklin.

The plan was that Enrique should remain in the loft until darkness fell, then slip away, find a cab, and meet Vera at the airport at eight. Thus she didn't become alarmed until the final boarding call came over the speaker with still no sign of Enrique. The appalling audacity of their plot, the magnitude of it, suddenly overwhelmed her with misgivings. She began to feel sick.

And then he was there, smiling reassurance, murmuring something about trouble finding a cab. He wore the suit of Franklin's Vera had given him, and a pair of Franklin's tinted glasses; his hair was trimmed and parted like Franklin's.

Moments later they were on the plane. As it took off Enrique stared out the window and said, "Adios, America."

Vera smiled, reached for his hand. "By now poor Franklin must be frantic. He'll have called Marsha and know I lied. What do you think he'll do?"

"What can he do? He is a crook."

Lifting her hand, he touched it to his lips. As he did so his shirt cuff shot out. He quickly dropped her hand as he spotted the bloodstain on the cuff, but Vera had seen nothing; her eyes were shut.

Such an innocent, Enrique thought fondly. Did she truly suppose they could simply run away like children with no fear of pursuit? He was only vaguely worried that in his haste he might not have buried Franklin's body deep enough in the garden. As for the murder itself, he was sure he'd left no visible evidence—there was only the spot of blood on his shirt cuff which must have been stained when he removed the coveralls.

"I won't relax until we're out of Brazil and on our way back to Mexico," said Vera.

"Viva Mexico!" he cried.

"Viva Mexico!" And then she laughed, thinking of how it had all started with her desire to learn Spanish. "We couldn't have stayed in Brazil anyway."

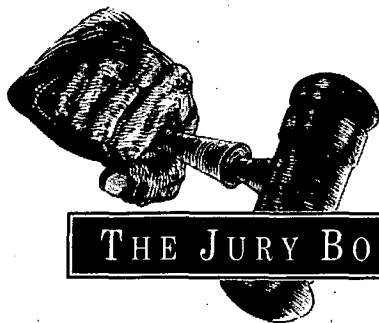
"Why not?" he asked.

"They speak Portuguese, don't they?" ●

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Continued from page 16

"Rigor mortis would never have set in so quickly in the icy bedroom," Santos said. "That means the body was stiff some hours before. It also means it wasn't the original body in the gorilla skin. It was Kenneth Wright who played ape, Captain. John Sacher had been shot and killed by his accomplice Terri hours before. They stuffed him into the skin and she fired three bullets into him. Take my word for it—they'll find four bullet holes in the body."



THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

Most of the great European capitals have produced at least one distinguished fictional police series. Amsterdam is surely one of the more prolific locales for Continental crime, with the series of Grijspra and de Gier novels by Janwillem van de Wetering and the Van der Valk books by Nicolas Free-ling. Add to these a long series of Dutch novels, highly successful in their native country and now being published in trade paperback by a small American firm. Their author, Albert Cornelis Baantjer, follows the lead of Georges Simenon, to whom any writer of Continental cop stories is inevitably compared, in using a one-name byline.

*** Baantjer: *DeKok and the Brothers of the Easy Death*, translated by H.G. Smit-tenaar; Intercontinental Publishing, P.O. Box 7242, Fairfax Station, VA 22309; \$7.95. De-

TECTIVE-Inspector DeKok, like his creator a longtime Amsterdam homicide detective, faces an original and tantalizing howdunit: A series of couples are found drowned in the city's canals, their arm-in-arm, hand-in-hand connection equally inconsistent with accident, suicide, or murder. The victims' common connection appears to be a religious cult called the Brothers and Sisters of the Holy Blessing. The elderly DeKok, fond of candy and cognac as well as clues, and his younger assistant Vledder are likable characters, and their investigation runs its fascinating course against a richly-realized background. The novel was first published in Holland in 1979. The publisher has 14 other DeKok books in print, with many more forthcoming. (If your bookstore doesn't stock these, the distributor is Atrium

Publishers Group, 11270 Clayton Creek Road, Lower Lake, CA 95457; 1-800-275-2606.)

*** Jean Hager: *Seven Black Stones*, Mysterious, \$18.95. The third case for Cherokee sleuth Molly Bearpaw is another good one, centering on octogenarian Zebediah Smoke's enmity for a bingo parlor being built adjacent to his property. The titular stones are found near the bodies of the novel's murder victims, suggesting tribal magic is involved in the crimes. If you share my conviction that the pure, fairly clued whodunit constitutes crime fiction's Main Street, you should be reading Hager.

*** Alan Russell: *The Fat Innkeeper*, Mysterious, \$19.95. The second case for Hotel California house detective Am Caulfield, like its predecessor, covers a variety of problems, notably Am's relations with the new Japanese management, the embarrassing presence of a Swap Meat (sic) swingers' convention, and the mysterious death of Dr. Kingsbury, a debunking guest of the Union of Near-Death Experiences Retreat. As before, the account is highly humorous and entertaining. If this is not quite up to *The Hotel Detective* (1994), it may be because the female lead is somewhat less interesting and the intricate plotting not quite as fresh and ingenious.

*** Parnell Hall: *Movie, Mysterious*, \$19.95. New York private eye and sometime actor Stanley Hastings now makes his debut as a screenwriter. The transmogrification of his courtroom mystery *Trial by Fire* into a "karate movie with four hot babes" called *Hands of Havoc*, *Flesh of Fire* marks only the beginning of his problems, as the film's Manhattan production is beset by murder. Though this isn't the best of the reliable Hastings series, the expected humor, character drawing, and fair-play plotting are all in place.

*** Barbara Parker: *Suspicion of Guilt*, Dutton, \$21.95. The second novel about Miami attorney Gail Connor is a solid specimen of the type of legal thriller that gives much attention to law office politics but never gets into the courtroom. Connor tries to help a former law school classmate prove his aunt's alleged final will is a forgery. Parker's writing and pacing are expert, and the story carries its near-400-page length well, though the family and romantic complications are less enthralling than the mystery. (Parker's *Suspicion of Innocence* was an Edgar nominee for best first mystery of 1994.)

For a list of all the major award winners plus other guideposts to the best in crime and mystery fiction, look for the

revised edition of *The Armchair Detective Book of Lists* (Penzler, \$12.95), edited by Kate Stine. From the same publisher comes a reprint of the second Ellery Queen novel, 1930's *The French Powder Mystery* (\$7), notable both for the early use of a specialized background (a New York department store) and masterful construction that withholds the main secret until the very last sentence of the text. Also in a new edition is the pioneering 1934 Sherlockian collection, *Baker Street Studies* (Penzler, \$8), edited by H.W. Bell, which leads off with Dorothy L. Sayers's speculation on "Holmes' College Career" and also includes among its contributors Helen Simpson, Vincent Starrett, and Ronald A. Knox.

Of the bumper crop of theme anthologies we've seen in recent seasons, I suspect cats run neck and neck with Christmas as the most frequent unifying factor. In *Mystery Cats 3: More Feline Felonies* (Signet, \$4.99), Cynthia Manson gathers sixteen stories, including a 1956 Captain Heimrich story by well-known cat fanciers Frances and Richard Lockridge and the famous 1963 tale "Phut Phat Concentrates" by an author who has made a whole career of writing cat mysteries, Lilian Jackson Braun. Other contributors include bylines as

various as Edward D. Hoch, Steven Saylor, Theodore Sturgeon, and Patricia Highsmith, and while most of the stories are drawn from the backfiles of *EQMM* and *AHMM*, in some cases the editor has gone farther afield, as for Charles Pettersen's Runyonesque "The Cat in the Bag" from a 1983 issue of *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine*.

Food is another popular, if slightly less frequent, anthology theme. Some popular sleuths who normally function at book length make short story appearances in Martin H. Greenberg's *Murder Most Delicious* (Signet, \$4.99), every original tale of which is accompanied by a recipe. Bill Crider's Sheriff Dan Rhodes and K.K. Beck's Iris Cooper both have enjoyable and solidly plotted cases, respectively concerning murder at a good-ole-boy Texas barbecue and a society dogooder's employment as cook of a convicted ground glass murderess in 1920s Portland, Oregon. Catherine Dain's "Too Many Cooks," in which Reno private eye Freddie O'Neal tries to find out who is sabotaging a public-access TV cooking show, is an example of a story with a terrific set-up but a disappointing windup. Still, the style and humor are charming enough to make me want to try one of the O'Neal novels.



THE MISSING HOUSE

by Hayford Peirce

The detecting business in Tahiti doesn't attract much custom beyond those locals who want me to locate an errant spouse or a sticky-fingered maid, so I was mildly surprised when the already half-open door to my small office was suddenly pushed 100 percent open and in stepped an obvious American tourist.

"If you're looking for the bank to change your traveler's checks," I said without bothering to remove my bare feet from the top of the battered desk where they were enjoying their morning nap, "it's two flights down and across the street."

The American's pale blue eyes swung around to my single window with its view of the old colonial cathedral and, beyond the church spire, the headquarters of the Westpac Bank, then turned back to me. "I've already been to the bank. Now I'm looking for someone named Joe Caneili. He's supposed to be a detective."

Supposed to be? That stung me, as you might imagine, and I swung my feet indignantly to the floor. I *was* a detective. After all, didn't the sign I'd carefully epoxied to the front of the three-story building I shared with a number of doctors and dentists here in downtown Papeete say:

AGENCE CANEILI
INVESTIGATIONS, SÉCURITÉ
DISCRÉTION ASSURÉE

"I'm the detective," I said, rising to my feet for the occasion.

"Glad to know it." He stuck his hand across the desk and we shook hands. "I'm Frank Hailey." He had that peculiar

Down East accent that makes normal folks like me who learned their English in Bookbinder, Kansas, want to grit their teeth every time they hear it.

I waved him to one of the three folding metal chairs on the other side of the desk and sank back into my own wooden one. "What can I do for you, Mr. Hailey?" I asked, conscious of the sharp contrast between my pure English diction and his weird accent from Bah Hahbah or some similar point of the New England compass.

"I want you to find my house."

"Find your *house*?" I repeated. "I thought we'd agreed that I was the detective. There's a real-estate agent right across the—"

He scowled impatiently and for some reason I actually shut up. He had the sort of scowl that looked as if it got a lot of practice. Aside from the scowl, Frank Hailey was a middle-aged gentleman who had kept himself in good shape. He had broad shoulders, a deep chest, and was only an inch or so shorter than myself. His skin was naturally pale, but his face was ruddy and

Exotic though Hayford Peirce's Tahitian mysteries are, they have a ring of truth that comes from his extensive knowledge of the island's people and customs. Mr. Peirce lived in Tahiti from 1964 to 1987 and held jobs as various as part owner of a button factory, a garden center, and a one-hour laundry. His story "The Missing House" may be a first in the annals of private-eye fiction. Can anyone think of another shamus hired to find a missing house? †

the backs of his hands deeply tanned. His light brown hair was slicked down and combed straight back, with a perfectly calculated part running straight down the middle of his head, like you see in those pictures of the Yale football team of '08 as they pose in their varsity sweaters. Sharp blue eyes glittered behind thick half-moon spectacles that perched on the end of a long thin nose. He was dressed in white drill trousers and a blue shirt with red hibiscuses on it, and although I couldn't see his feet from where I sat, I bet myself that he was wearing both shoes *and* socks. If he'd been wearing a three-piece suit, I'd have said he was the loan officer who turns down your application for the purchase of a used car. But even without it, he didn't look like anyone who suffered fools gladly.

But if that was the case, what was he doing in Tahiti?

"You want me to find you a house?"

"Not just any house. *My* house." For a fleeting moment a bleak smile seemed to flicker across his face. "Now if the jokes are all finished for the morning, I'll explain. Although the person who recommended you did say you might be a little trying."

"My pal," I muttered. "Might I ask who? Just in case he tries to sue me for his finder's fee."

Again I got a glimpse of the same wintry smile. "I doubt that he'll be suing. Not the chief of police."

I stared at him in astonishment. "Alexandre Tama?" He nodded. I groaned. *Monsieur le Commissaire de Police* was certainly no pal of mine, and far from being an admirer. The few times I'd run across the uniformed fat man in the line of business he'd made it perfectly clear that while he couldn't actually keep me off the streets, he didn't really think I ought to be allowed to roam them without a keeper.

"You must have a very unusual problem if he wants to dump it off on me," I said with my usual delicacy.

"I don't know how unusual it is," said Frank Hailey. "All I know is that it's a case of grand theft and no one on this blasted island will take it seriously."

"But Alexandre Tama says that *I'll* take it seriously."

"He says you need the money."

I snorted disgustedly. I didn't need the money so badly that Tama had to send me every ding-a-ling in the South Pacific to keep them from cluttering up his own office. You'd be surprised at how good a monthly pension a grateful French government

pays a twenty-year veteran of the Foreign Legion, especially a one-time sergeant major. On the other hand, you'd be even more startled at what it costs to live in the so-called earthly paradise of French Polynesia, which is where I'd taken leave of the Legion and set up shop as a newly sworn-in French citizen a few years before. Even if your tastes run mainly to lying on black-sand beaches and swapping lies with old comrades, a few extra francs at the end of the month never come amiss if you occasionally like to spread a little pâté on your daily loaf of crusty French bread.

So the Agence Caneili was now open for business to all and sundry, even those who wanted to bend my ear about a missing house.

While Frank Hailey had been practicing his scowl on all the happy kids fortunate enough to find themselves in the school district he ran on the island of Martha's Vineyard in the cold Atlantic waters just off the coast of Massachusetts, some rascally miscreant here in Tahiti had made off with his mountain-side home in the district of Mataiea. Or so he solemnly assured me.

I could see why the chief of police had sent him to me.

But I also wanted to see the site of the missing house for myself, which was more than that fatty old Alexandre Tama had bothered to do. Though I guess if you're far and away the fattest man on an island of notably stout trenchermen, you can be excused for not leaping up from your desk at the bidding of every American crackpot who wanders into your office.

My faithful red Deux Chevaux, that curious French car that looks as if it was put together in someone's backyard from left-over pieces of corrugated tin, was soaking up the dazzling July sunshine down on the waterfront parking lot, so we climbed into Hailey's equally battered Peugeot pickup truck, which he'd parked on the sidewalk in front of the Hinano brewing plant just like any true Frenchman, and drove through Papeete's perpetual traffic jam and out into the green calm of the districts.

By the time we'd reached the tenth-kilometer marker, the short stretch of freeway in the hills behind town had narrowed down to a two-lane road that then followed the coast the rest of the way around the island. Traffic began to thin out as we passed through the districts of Punaaula and Paea, which in recent years had become the bedroom communities of the city of Papeete, and I was glad to see that hardly any traces remained of

the great cyclone that had ravaged Tahiti five months earlier. Most of the great chestnut and ironwood trees that had previously lined the road had been chopped down by the zealous workmen of the electric company, but the bright hedges of hibiscus and crotons were in full bloom, and it was rare to see a house whose roof was still unrepaired. To my left, the jagged peaks of Tahiti's rugged interior rose up against a clear blue sky, while to my right the placid waters of the lagoon stretched out to a thin line of white surf that was the Pacific Ocean pounding against the distant coral reef.

Frank Hailey's home, or however much of it remained, was in the district of Mataiea, he'd said, out towards the forty-seventh kilometer on the south coast of the island. Electricity had come to Mataiea in recent years, along with the telephone, but once we'd left Paea and entered Papara most of the houses were behind us, and the lush green countryside looked much as it must have in the days of Gauguin and the horse and buggy at the turn of the century. Chinese and Tahitians still cultivated small plots of taro and manioc, and fishermen paddled their pirogues languidly across the mirrorlike surface of the lagoon. At one point the coastal plain broadened enough for the island's single golf course, but as we continued into Mataiea the foothills drew nearer the road and the sharp peaks of the mountains loomed just behind.

We passed a thick clump of banana plants and Hailey began to brake the rattletrap gray Peugeot. He turned left at one of the few remaining old-time district stores that hadn't been replaced in recent years by a concrete-block supermarket and we began to bump our way along a weed-choked track that seemed more of a tunnel hacked out between *bourau* trees and banana plants, hibiscus and false-coffee, than an actual road.

Before we'd left my office, Hailey had told me that his house was about half a mile off the main road, situated on the side of a hill so that it overlooked the broad blue Pacific and the Presqu'île de Taiarapu, which for all practical purposes is a separate island joined to Tahiti only by a low narrow isthmus. The peninsula has its own soaring mountains and high green plateaus and there's generally a fine interplay of sun and rain clouds around its peaks, but for Frank Hailey it was the view of the broad-bosomed ocean that made his heart beat faster.

Someone once said that owning a yacht is like sitting in a

rocking chair under an icy shower tearing up hundred-dollar bills. That was a sentiment any good Kansan like myself would agree with, but Hailey had grown up as a youngster on lobster boats in Southwest Harbor on the coast of Maine and saw things differently. Later on, when he wasn't working his way up the Massachusetts school system, he'd become one of that curious breed of people who get their kicks out of sailing small, dangerous, uncomfortable boats to all the remote corners of the world. He couldn't afford to own one himself, but he spent his summers crewing for people who could, and one memorable year he had sailed down to the South Pacific on what used to be a biannual yacht race from the West Coast to Tahiti.

His flinty New England soul had been captivated by whatever it is about Tahiti that captivates so many people. He'd returned a couple of times to the Club Med, and then been lucky enough to find someone willing to sell him a couple of acres of almost totally worthless land in the hills of Mataiea. A Chinese truck farmer had already put in the rough path we were now bumping along to reach his plantation of lettuce and cabbage deep in the hills, so Hailey had access of a sort, and for a guy whose idea of heaven on earth was several months' confinement on an unheated, unlighted boat, the lack of water and electricity meant nothing. That was twenty years ago, and for two decades now the Massachusetts schoolteacher, then principal, then district supervisor, had come to Tahiti for three months every summer.

Working entirely by himself, first he'd built a lean-to, then worked his way up to a hut, and finally to a tiny house of bamboo and coconut thatch. By the time he'd made principal he'd tired of living on accumulated rainwater and was lucky enough to sink a well and find water. After that he'd added a septic tank and indoor plumbing and a couple of years later he'd bought a secondhand Lister generator whose design hadn't changed in forty years and now he had electricity. He built a garage to shelter the Peugeot truck and the cement mixer he'd picked up from a Tahitian contractor who'd suddenly gone bankrupt and left them sitting in the rain. It took him the rest of that summer to get them running again but by the middle of the following June he was pouring the footings for what would eventually be The House.

The brush around us had thinned out now and we were moving slowly through the gap between two knobby green hills, bare

except for a short fernlike vegetation that carpeted them evenly. Suddenly Hailey wrenched the truck sharply to the right, and as we began to climb at a surprisingly steep angle I saw that we were driving along two rows of concrete paving stones. "Had a truck fall off the hillside one time after two weeks' rain," he said with his flat Yankee twang. "Scary. Took me three years to get the paving down."

I was still wondering whether I should be admiring his tenacity or pitying his bubbleheadedness in wanting to live in such an out-of-the-way place when the laboring Peugeot reached the crest of the hill and to my surprise moved into the dark shade of a small grove of trees. There were light green *aito* pines, large dark mangos covered with fruit, a couple of enormous breadfruit, a few clumps of even taller bamboo, and a number of other varieties I didn't recognize. It wasn't as varied a display as the Botanical Gardens a few miles down the road, but it was a pretty impressive display for the stark bare hills of Mataiea.

"That's a lot of planting."

"Yep." We emerged into the late-morning sunlight and he stopped the truck. He got out and gestured at the grove of trees swaying gently in the trade winds that swept in over the great mass of the Presqu'île and the glittering blue bay between the peninsula and the mainland. "You're the detective," he said in his schoolmasterish voice. "Look at the trees."

I looked at the trees.

"They're a clue," he hinted.

I frowned and took a step nearer the trees. I shook my head. They still looked like trees to me.

Frank Hailey sighed softly, as if he were marking an F on my report card, and turned back to his truck. We drove another fifty meters along his neatly paved road, this time passing between dozens of citrus trees in different stages of growth. There were various species of lime and grapefruit, lemon and orange. Lemons aren't found naturally in Tahiti, so he must have smuggled some cuttings in. A couple of the orange trees actually had orange-colored fruit on them, so they must have been smuggled in too. The local Tahitian oranges that grow wild in the mountains are juicy and tasty, but a strange dark green in color. I've never understood why they're still called oranges, so in defense of the purity of the French language I call them "greens" whenever I buy them at my neighborhood store, thoroughly baffling my Chinese grocer.

We came to a one-car garage with a high-pitched thatched roof that sat by itself in the midst of a clump of brilliant lavender bougainvillea and pale yellow and green pandanus trees. A large toolroom and a soundproofed generator room were built into the ground level, along with a modest bedroom and living quarters in the cramped space above the garage. Its bamboo walls glistened in the sun with a glossy varnish, the pandanus thatch was held neatly in place by barely visible chicken wire, and its airy workroom held enough tools and meticulously arranged drawers of every conceivable nut and bolt and screw to furnish a medium-sized hardware store. The A-shaped frame of the front of the garage was covered by an intricately carved wooden frieze of Marquesan design painted red and black.

"You built all this yourself?" I marveled.

"Yep. Except for those decorations there."

"When you were a schoolteacher, did you teach shop by any chance?"

A thin smile flickered across his face. "Science and mathematics. I like working with my hands. I find it relaxing."

I shook my head in admiration. "Do you know what carpenters are making an hour in Tahiti these days? You could be a millionaire overnight."

His lips twitched. "All I want is my house." He started off across the lawn, then turned. "The garage—it's another clue."

I studied the immaculate garage for another minute, then, shaking my head, followed him obediently across a recently mowed lawn of thick Bermuda grass. The ground sloped gently downwards, then fell suddenly off into space. Below us a narrow valley of coconut palms ran down to the glittering sea, their broad fronds waving silently in the breeze. It was here that Frank Hailey had bulldozed a flat terrace out of the hillside and then labored with single-minded determination for nine consecutive summers at the construction of his dream house.

Now he stood motionless, staring down at a bare gray concrete slab. This much of his story, at least, was true: There was absolutely no trace of a house to be seen.

"This is where my house was," he said flatly.

"You don't think the cyclone blew it away, then?"

He snorted impatiently. "Does it *look* like a cyclone blew it away?" His frosty blue eyes stared at me balefully.

Scratching my chin I walked slowly out onto the concrete slab.

In a couple of places ends of plumbing stuck out through the slab. "It doesn't strike you as strange that all of the plumbing ends exactly at the joints?" he asked with dour sarcasm. "Do you see any pipes twisted and broken the way they might be if a hurricane had lifted up your house and blown it away?"

"Well . . ." I muttered.

"And the toilet? And the bathtub?" he demanded. "You think hurricanes rip away bolted-down toilets and bathtubs?"

"I don't know much about plumbing," I said with perfect truth. "I do know that hurricanes blow away roofs. And you haven't got a roof. What about your walls, what kind of material were they?"

"Look." He pointed down at the slab. "See that bolt sticking up there? See how the cement's a different color?"

I looked. A straight line five or six inches wide ran along the slab with the threaded ends of galvanized bolts sticking out of the concrete every two or three feet. "You put the bolts in the slab before you poured the concrete, then used them to bolt down the plate for your walls?" I asked. He nodded approvingly.

I'd worked as a carpenter's teenage assistant one hot summer in Bookbinder a year or so before a trivial misunderstanding with the fine gentlemen of the Cologne police force had prompted me to catch a train south to Marseille and the glamorous life of the Foreign Legion, so this made sense to me. Once the concrete had set you'd take a two-by-four and drill holes in the appropriate spaces. Then you'd lay it down over the bolts in the slab, put a washer and a nut around the end of the bolt, and tighten the board down against the foundation. The two-by-four studs that you'd use to frame your walls would then be nailed down on top of this immovable base.

I removed the broad white plantation hat of finely woven pandanus I wear to preserve my incognito whenever I venture out of the office and wiped the sweat from my forehead. Then I walked around the slab examining the seventy-five or so bolts he'd used to lock his walls in place. None of them looked as if they'd offered any resistance while the worst cyclone of the century had ripped away the walls they were supposed to be holding down. And these were good-sized bolts, as big around as my thumb. "Looks like all of the nuts were taken off and the plate lifted off," I said, just to show him that I could read a clue as well as the next detective. "You couldn't get the cops to come look, but what did the insurance guy have to say when you showed him the bolts?"

I was treated to his grade-A scowl, the one he saved for Latin teachers caught smoking pot behind the little red schoolhouse during recess. "He said it looked as if someone had taken off the plate."

"Well?"

His scowl intensified. "Then he said it was probably the caretaker, cleaning up after the damage. When I asked him—politely as I could, of course—just why the cyclone hadn't uprooted any of my trees or blown away the garage, he just shrugged and said that cyclones do funny things." He stalked over to a big pile of rubbish that was stacked behind a thick hedge of *aito* pine. "Look at all of this junk," he said disgustedly. "The insurance guy had the guff to say *this* was the remains of my house."

"I suppose it isn't."

"For pity's sake, man, does this look like *that*?" He pulled out a color photograph of a small but gracefully proportioned house of semi-Japanese design. Even in the bright sunlight of the picture it looked cool and inviting. Its walls were mainly semitransparent shoji panels, with here and there some varnished bamboo, both the flat plaiting that has been woven together and the knobby yellow tubes of the trunks. It had a big airy veranda in front, and the gently sloping roof appeared to be genuine red Mexican tile. I looked from the photo in my hand back to the pile of junk at my feet, the rotten old two-by-fours, split pieces of plywood and garishly painted composition board, the twisted corrugated tin roofing, and all the other miscellaneous flotsam and jetsam you might expect to find after a 140-mile-an-hour cyclone has roared back and forth across your property for a couple of hours. But I had to admit there wasn't much in the junk pile that looked as if it might have once been put together with loving care by the Master Builder of Martha's Vineyard.

"I suppose the caretaker stacked all this stuff up after the storm," I suggested tentatively. "The question is: Where did it come from? Just where is this caretaker of yours?"

"It's a she." Frank Hailey pursed his lips in exasperation mingled with embarrassment. "And I don't know where she is. Bora Bora maybe. She's the one who wrote me after the cyclone that my house was gone."

"When was that?"

"About a month later. A real Tahitian letter. *Dear Mr. Hailey, There was a cyclone. It was very strong. It blew your house away.*

Please do not forget my salary. I terminate my little letter."

I tried to suppress a snort of laughter. My Tahitian landlord had once burned down my own house along with all of my possessions, so I knew what it was like to be suddenly homeless. I could even see the humor in the situation. But frankly it was funnier when it was happening to someone else. "And then what happened?" I asked, with a deep scowl of my own to conceal my stifled laughter.

"The hurricane was in February, so she must have written sometime in March or April, but I couldn't get down until the middle of June. So I decided not to do anything at all until I got here. Except to write to my insurance company. They wrote back to say I didn't have hurricane insurance, so there was nothing they could do."

I nodded. At least a thousand homes in Tahiti had lost their roofs, and several hundred had been totally destroyed, during the big blow. Very few of them had been covered by hurricane insurance, so the insurance companies had come out of it all pretty well. In fact, they then made a fortune selling insurance against the *next* hurricane—the one that still hasn't come. "So it comes down to this: If your house got blown away, they pay you nothing. If your house got stolen they've got to pay off. I guess a house is insured against theft. . . ."

"Exactly." Frank Hailey gave me a grudging nod of measured Down East approval. I'd worked my way back up to a C+.

"Okay," I said. I'd never much cared for insurance companies either. "Let's go find your house."

Maybe in England it's always the butler who did it. But in Tahiti if something's missing you generally start out by looking for the maid—who generally is missing as well. Even though it was a missing house in this particular case, nothing else seemed to have changed.

On the way down the valley Hailey told me that he'd met his caretaker, Mama Alfred, several years before at the general store where the track into his home joined the main road. She was sitting on the edge of the rickety wooden porch wiggling her bare toes in the dust, a fat, apparently good-natured Tahitian woman of about thirty with a pareo cloth wrapped around her plump figure and an empty bottle of orangeade in her hand.

"That was what impressed me when she asked for a job," confided Hailey, "the orangeade. All the other layabouts lolly-gagging around were drinking beer." So even in Tahiti the Puritan ethic still counted for something. So he'd hired her to help him with the gardening and housecleaning while he was busy building and eventually asked if she would be his live-in caretaker for the nine months a year he was away. Mama Alfred had jumped at the chance and had quickly moved into the quarters over the garage with all of her worldly possessions apparently bundled up into two pareo cloths.

"You never . . .?" I hinted delicately.

He turned and shot me the frostiest glare of the day. "If you'd seen Mama Alfred you wouldn't ask. I told you she was fat. I could have added ugly, too."

I nodded. "Detectives are nosy by nature. If they weren't, they wouldn't be detectives. So now we've got Mama Alfred living over your garage, taking care of the place when you're not there. What's the rest of her name?"

"I don't know. I just called her Mama Alfred."

"That's a funny name for a woman. She wouldn't be a transvestite by any chance? An awful lot of *them* are fat and ugly and—"

"You think I'd hire a *transvestite*?" My New England schoolmaster nearly drove off the road in his consternation.

I shrugged. "There are a lot of them in Tahiti. They like being maids and gardeners. They—"

"Mama Alfred is *not* a transvestite," he said with icy finality. "I think she might have been married once to someone named Alfred." And that was the end of the conversation until we came to the junction and the dilapidated Chinese store.

"You say you met her at the store," I said thoughtfully as I considered the rickety two-story wooden structure with its half-collapsed porch and ragged shreds of pale green paint that might have been applied just about the time a German gunboat bombarded Papeete harbor in the early days of the First World War. "Just how did you pay Mama Alfred when you were away?"

"By check, once a month, on my account at the Bank of Papeete. I mailed it to her care of this store."

"Mmph. Who did you make the check out to?" I asked, although I was pretty certain that I already knew the answer.

"Just Mama Alfred," he said.

That was the answer I'd been expecting. I sighed. It was always fun watching Europeans and Americans wholeheartedly embracing the Tahitian way of doing things. "I don't suppose you declared her to the social security people either?"

"Out here in the districts?" He looked at me in astonishment. "Why bother?"

I shrugged. Someday when their computer caught up with him and made him cough up six years' back payments, plus a fine in the same amount, he'd find out, but in the meantime it just made it that much harder to track down the elusive Mama Alfred.

We walked on into the gloomy cavern of the malodorous general store and Frank Hailey introduced me to the wan Chinese who stood with melancholy resignation in front of his sagging shelves of American canned goods and French comic books and Taiwanese kerosene lanterns. A scrawny white cat lay on the counter in front of him and an even scrawnier yellow dog was scratching fleas over in a dark corner where two shadowy Tahitians stood drinking beer and rolling Bull Durham cigarettes.

It didn't take long to discover that no one in the store knew of Frank Hailey's fat and ugly—but good-natured, I scrupulously reminded them—caretaker except as Mama Alfred. Years ago, before she'd moved into my client's palatial hillside garage, she'd lived in a shack somewhere down the main road, but the man she was living with—the celebrated Alfred himself—had suddenly moved off to Bora Bora and the shack itself had long since disappeared. While Hailey the Master Builder was in residence during the summer months, Mama Alfred would walk down to the store to buy his daily bread. When he was back in Massachusetts she followed the same routine except that once a month she would pick up his letter and check.

"I suppose she cashed it here?" I asked.

The Chinese looked at me in surprise, then nodded. Where else? his sad brown eyes asked. Didn't *all* the Chinese stores in Tahiti act as bankers for their Tahitian customers? "She endorsed it over to you, and then you signed it and deposited it in your own bank?"

He nodded again. Even for a Chinese he was a man of remarkably few words.

"Can you remember how she endorsed it, what name she used?"

This time I got a shrug of his scrawny shoulders and an apathetic shake of his head. But by persevering I eventually managed to extract a few nuggets of information. As the shopkeeper had told Hailey just after his arrival in June, Mama Alfred stopped coming by on a daily basis sometime in April, but nonetheless showed up at the end of April and the end of May to cash the checks for those months. That had surprised him, since when she had stopped coming by regularly, she had told him that *le patron's* house had blown away and that she was returning to Alfred in Bora Bora. He shrugged his thin shoulders at the folly of trying to understand what Tahitians would do.

I gave him my own strong silent nod and marched on out of the murky darkness and back into the bright sunlight.

"You think that's going to be of any use?" asked Hailey as the Peugeot slowly gathered speed for the return to town.

I shrugged. "Maybe. Let's go find out how she endorsed them. This isn't Switzerland, after all. And anyway, it's your own checks that you want to see."

Of the five or six banks in Tahiti, only one of them sent back canceled checks with their monthly statements. The rest of them, I'd once been told, were supposed to keep them in their vaults for the next twenty years. I had my doubts about whether any of them actually bothered to go to that extreme, but in Mama Alfred's case we were only talking about checks that covered the last couple of years.

By the time we got back to town, however, everyone there was heading in the other direction for lunch, so after parking the pickup in the waterfront parking lot, we walked across the main street of town and into an open sidewalk café where we ordered a couple of bottles of the famous but grossly overrated Hinano beer along with some thick grilled ham and cheese sandwiches. For the next hour we sat admiring the jagged outline of the island of Moorea draped across the horizon while Hailey told me about life on his other island in the North Atlantic and I told him lies about the romantic life of the Foreign Legion. At last it was time to return to the bank.

I led Hailey through the glittering marble lobby with its bubbling waterfall and up the stairs to the third floor where I knew a tiny Chinese girl named Hélène who was fairly well up in the accounting department. We sat around her desk and I chatted

with her about nothing in particular while my client leafed through his pocket checkbook and located the numbers of the last seven checks he'd made out to Mama Alfred.

For a man who'd been coming to Tahiti for twenty years now, Hailey's French was really pretty moderate—the romance of the islands had evidently led him to concentrate his efforts on teaching himself Tahitian so he could discuss metaphysics with Mama Alfred while she fried his morning eggs. So I did his bank work for him while he tried to look as if he knew what was going on. "It'll take at least two days," I told him finally. "All the checks are kept in another building, and even if H  l  ne goes to find them personally it'll still take awhile."

He stood up to say, "*Merci beaucoup*," to H  l  ne with a Yankee twang sharp enough to make a dog howl in agony and asked me if there wasn't anything else I could do.

"I could go over to the zoning people and spend a week going through all the building permits issued since the cyclone, but I have the feeling that the kind of scofflaw who steals a house isn't going to worry about getting a piece of paper to rebuild it somewhere else. In any case, when all of those houses came down in the cyclone, they were rebuilt as fast as possible—no one was bothering with the zoning people."

"So there's nothing to do but wait." He sounded disgusted.

"Don't look so discouraged," I said brightly. "We'll find your house for you. I once found a grandfather who'd been stolen twenty years after he was dead."

"You *what*?" His half-moon spectacles flashed.

"Buy me a beer and I'll tell you all about it. I don't suppose it's the sort of theft that happens every day in Edgartown."

Three days later I called my client at the modest residential hotel he was staying at just behind the headquarters of the Gendarmerie Nationale on the tree-lined Avenue Bruat. "I've got the real name of Mama Alfred," I told him triumphantly. "Most of the checks she just signed *Mama Alfred*. But on the check for January she signed her real name, along with an ID card number—it must have been the Chinaman's wife who cashed the check for her that day."

But Frank Hailey's enthusiasm was distinctly muted. Perhaps he'd come to realize that in spite of my pal Alexandre Tama's unstinting recommendation, I didn't *really* have a degree from

the Massachusetts Institute of Detectology. He didn't even bother to ask what the real name was. "So you've found her then?"

"Not yet, but I will."

"Let me know when you do." And he hung up. I shrugged compassionately. The agony of suddenly going cold turkey without baked beans and brown bread would be enough to make any good New Englander edgy.

I lifted my feet to the top of my desk and set about the task of finding Mama Alfred, real name Omiti Tevahine Matairere.

How would a Ph.D. from M.I.D. go about it? I wondered.

Probably he'd just pick up the local phone book and look for the page that listed the various Mataireres of Tahiti.

There were only two Mataireres in the book, one of them here in town and the other on the Peninsula of Taiarapu on the far side of the island, so I chose to visit the nearer one first. This turned out to be Georges Matairere, who lived in a modest concrete-block house in an equally modest Tahitian quarter not far from the industrial zone in the valley of Tipaerui. A towering breadfruit tree spread its broad leaves over his small front yard of tramped-down dirt, offering cool shade as well as something for the table.

Georges himself was off at work but his wife Hina was home, tending to two small naked children who clutched the backs of her scrawny legs and peered out shyly at me with enormous brown eyes while we stood talking in the yard. She was a small, thin Tahitian who wore a faded yellow pareo cloth around her hips and a dirty white T-shirt three sizes too large for her.

She sniffed loudly when I asked if she knew of a Mademoiselle Omiti Tevahine Matairere. "Her!" she said scornfully. "What do you want with *her*?"

"You know her, then?"

"Of course I do. Isn't she my husband's good-for-nothing sister?"

"You don't sound very fond of her."

"You wouldn't be very fond of her either if the only time you ever saw her was when she came by to borrow money or eat your food and drink your beer before going out dancing all night."

"I don't suppose I would. You mean she comes by here from time to time?"

Madame Matairere shook her head. "Not anymore. I think she's gone back to that good-for-nothing Alfred."

"The good-for-nothing Alfred who's in Bora Bora."

"That's the one," she said with finality.

I grimaced. It looked as if Frank Hailey was going to have to spring for a plane ticket over to Bora and back, but since this was Tahiti I knew very well that when I'd made the three-hour trip to Bora Bora it would be to learn that the elusive Mama Alfred had packed her bags to go dancing in Mangareva a thousand miles on the other side of the archipelago. I thanked Madame Matairere glumly and watched her scoop up her children and turn back to her household labors.

There was something printed on the back of her floppy T-shirt, something that made me take three quick steps after her and bend forward for a better look at the neat blue lettering:

PAOTAI, JOËL
ENTREPRENEUR
TEL. 34.98.03

"Excuse me," I said to her back. "This Joël Paotai, he builds houses?"

Madame Matairere whirled around in surprise, then remembered the T-shirt she was wearing. "Sometimes." She shrugged. "He does a little of everything. He only has one or two workers."

"You know him? Can you recommend him?"

She shrugged again. "He's my husband's cousin. He's another one of Mama Alfred's good-for-nothing friends. That's where I got this T-shirt. I guess he's about as crooked as any other contractor." I wondered if it was contractors she didn't like or just contractors who were friends of Mama Alfred's.

"I don't suppose you know where he's working right now?"

She pursed her thin lips. "He might be doing something on some used-car lot in Faaa, I don't know which one."

I thanked her again and walked thoughtfully back to my hand-painted Deux Chevaux. I noticed that some red paint was already flaking off the left rear fender. Time to get out my spray can again.

Faaa is sort of a trashy suburb of Papeete that has exploded in population in the last fifteen years, mostly with poor Tahitian families come in from the tedium of the outer islands to make

their fortunes in the big city. The runway of Tahiti's international airport stretches across Faaa's shallow lagoon, and sometimes it seems as if there are as many used-car lots on the road through Faaa as there are tourists stepping down from the planes.

Luck was with me today. The third place I drove by that had a big banner stretched across its lot advertising *Voitures d'Occasion* also had a yellow Renault van parked by the side of the road with Joël Paotai's name painted on the side. I slowed down enough to spot three mahogany-colored Tahitians in bathing suits working on some unidentifiable wooden structure in the middle of the lot.

I came to a halt in front of a tiny shopping center of five or six stores just up the road from the used-car emporium. It had a crowded parking lot in front of it so I let my Deux Chevaux mingle with the other cars and settled down for the afternoon in the front seat with my face in the shade cast by my broad pandanus hat.

At three o'clock, Joël Paotai and his two Tahitian helpers put away the tools they were using to build an elevated ramp that I supposed would be used to display the cream of the crop of the cars of occasion and climbed into the van and drove off towards town.

I followed easily enough from three or four cars behind and watched the yellow Renault stop twice to let off the two hired hands, once by the road that led up the valley of Tipaerui, and then beside the downtown post office. It continued on through town into the far more elegant suburb of Paea on the other side. We drove past the tennis courts and the soccer stadium and then suddenly turned off the main road at a point where a sign advertises the Belvédère Restaurant high in the mountains behind town.

I was now directly behind the Renault, the only other car on the narrow road, but I needn't have worried about being spotted. The road began to climb immediately, and at the first steep grade and sharp turn in the road the van gained fifty yards on my two-squirrel-power vehicle. By the time I'd frantically pedaled my way past the next turning and onto a short straight-away, the van was out of sight. I continued on up the hill for the half mile or so in which there were houses on the right-hand side of the road, but the Renault had disappeared. Finally the

road narrowed to a single lane to continue its winding way for the last two miles up to the restaurant and I stopped and turned around. Going back down, the houses were to my left while on my right a precipitous drop-off fell to the distant valley floor. I scanned the passing houses as closely as I could through the thick hedges and trees that hid them, but there was still no sign of the contractor's van.

The following morning I was up more or less with the millions of demented roosters that help make living in Tahiti such a joy and by 5:30 was parked in the misty gray dawn about three-quarters of the way up the Route du Belvédère. I yawned and wondered sleepily what they taught about stakeouts back in Cambridge at the Massachusetts Institute of Detectology.

No one bothers with street numbers for houses in Tahiti, so although another examination of the phone book had told me that Joël Paotai did indeed live on the Belvédère Road, I still wasn't any nearer to finding him than I had been before. But from where I was parked in the dark shadows of an ironwood tree I could see enough of the road ahead of me to be reasonably certain I'd be able to spot the yellow van wherever it made its appearance.

It was a good thing I'd got up with the chickens. Ten minutes later the light of the Renault van suddenly appeared in my rear-view mirror as it pulled out of a driveway about twenty yards farther up the mountain. I scrunched down in my seat as it passed, then drove slowly down the hill until I could turn my Deux Chevaux around and come back up again at an even more snail-like pace.

When I came to where Joël Paotai's yellow van had appeared behind me, I found a narrow paved road about 100 yards long covered by a heavy canopy of flame trees. It was a tight fit, with cars jammed in on either side. The houses were hidden behind thick hedges and wooden fences, and half a dozen angry dogs set up a fearful racket at the passage of my rumbling Deux Chevaux. Tahitians are early risers and lights were on in most of the houses. After passing five or six houses on each side, I had to stop where the road suddenly petered out in a thicket of bushes. It was too narrow to turn around, so I backed on out, once again sending the dogs into a frenzy of excitement.

I was a little bit excited myself. As I let my car roll slowly down the road I sneaked a quick glance at my watch. It was still

only six in the morning, even though the sun was up beyond the mountains now and the sky over Moorea was already a pale blue. I yawned and rubbed my eyes. Should I go back to bed for an hour or so until my client was up and about? I dismissed the thought—it wasn't every day that I found a stolen house.

As things turned out, all I can say is, thank goodness.

My client Frank Hailey had already got the big horse-laugh once from our chubby chief of police Alexandre Tama when he went to report a stolen house, and I was determined that we wouldn't get the same brush-off when we went by to report that the three little kittens had found their mittens and now could have some pie.

So after digging my Massachusetts schoolteacher out of bed at his quiet hotel and pouring some coffee into him, I dragged him downtown to the office of one of the island's *huissiers*. The *huissier* is an officer of the court who serves summonses and whatnot, but he can also be hired by any Joe Blow off the street to act as a sort of official witness.

The one I knew best, Pierre Favre, was short and jovial, with a thick Niçoise accent and a neatly trimmed black beard that was just beginning to turn gray. His office was on the second floor of one of the concrete office buildings that are blighting the Papeete skyline and we were early enough to find him in before he wandered over to the courts for the morning. He'd never handled a case of a stolen house before, but his eyes twinkled as I told him about it. "You're *certain* this is your house?" he asked Frank Hailey.

"Of course he isn't," I said. "He hasn't seen it yet."

"I don't understand."

"That's why we're here seeing you. My client is going to show you pictures of his house, and draw you the floor plans, and tell you all about the special materials from the States that went into building it, and you're going to write it all down in your official little notebook."

The *huissier* nodded, his lips pursed thoughtfully.

"Then," I said, "once all of that has become a matter of official record, then you and I and my client here are going to go visit this house and *you* are going to decide whether it's his house or not. And after that we can go pay a visit to my favorite fatty, Alexandre Tama."

Pierre Favre shook his head in wry disbelief. "What a trickster you are, Caneili! You really think I can do that?"

I gave him a look that even my schoolmaster friend would have been happy to own, the glare of a sergeant major of the Foreign Legion confronted by insubordination in the ranks. "Why not?" I demanded.

He looked at me and burst into laughter. "You're right—why not?"

It wasn't until nearly noontime that Favre finished his business in court. The three of us met at his office and then all piled into my bright red Deux Chevaux for the ten-minute drive through the rush-hour traffic and up the hill that led to the Belvédère Restaurant. With the three of us in the car, I wondered occasionally if it was going to make it up the grade. It rocked and shook and staggered and roared as I frantically worked its ridiculous gearshift in and out of its absurd place in the middle of the dashboard. I was concentrating so hard on handling the car that I missed the road that led into Joël Paotai's and had to continue another painful hundred yards up the hill before I could find a place to turn. We rolled slowly back down in neutral, and rather than turning into the tight clutter of cars that I'd had to work my way through earlier in the morning, I left the Deux Chevaux on the side of the Belvédère Road, parked in the shade of a large flame tree that overlooked the valley below.

The three of us got out, and while the neighborhood dogs yelped and barked and ran back and forth inside their yards, we walked quickly down the short stretch of road until we came to the third house on the right. It was pretty well concealed by a thick hedge of yellow and white hibiscus mixed with dark red crotons and pale green false-coffee. But if you stopped at the sliding metal gate and looked inside to your right you could see a neat little house of yellow bamboo and cream-colored Japanese panels and dull red Mexican tile. I pointed a dramatic finger and turned to my client. "Is *that* your house?" I asked Frank Hailey.

His frosty blue eyes glittered. "That's my house."

"Okay," I said, "you two wait while I make absolutely certain."

Frank Hailey was indignant. "I already told you—"

"This will just take a minute," I said soothingly and left them waiting in the dappled shade of the trees that arched over the street. Actually it took about six minutes before I returned to

report that the neighbors across the street had confirmed that the wooden house of Joël Paotai, contractor, had been almost totally destroyed by the great cyclone of five months before. "A while later he started building this one," I concluded, "just him and a couple of workmen and the woman he lives with."

Even the *huissier* Pierre Favre looked impressed. "Now what do we do?" he asked.

"There's no car in the driveway," I said, pointing out the obvious. "Why don't you see if there's anyone at home?"

So while Frank Hailey and I stepped discreetly back behind the shelter of the hedge, Favre asked loudly with his Niçoise accent if anyone was there. A moment later we heard an answering shout, and through the leaves of the hedge we could dimly see someone moving out toward the road. Standing in front of the gate, Pierre Favre looked expectant.

"Yes?" said a soft voice as a well-fleshed Tahitian woman with a great bun of black hair piled up on her head stepped into view. She had a yellow pareo wrapped around her mighty bosom and if you were uncharitable about it all you could say that in spite of her pleasant smile and twinkling eyes she was both fat and ugly.

"Mama Alfred!" growled Frank Hailey, and took a step forward.

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened. She disappeared from sight much faster than she had appeared, leaving the three of us standing foolishly by the gate. My client had his hand on the gate to pull it open, but I put my hand on his arm. "Better not. We want to do this legally." I turned to the *huissier*. "Now what do we do?"

He grimaced. "I don't know. Legally I can't go in unless someone in the house—"

We were startled by the impatient honking of a loud shrill horn just behind us. When I returned to earth from the measly two or three meters I'd jumped in the air, I saw that a yellow Renault van had crept up unnoticed. Joël Paotai's name was painted on the side in sloppy black letters.

"That's the guy who stole my house!" shouted Frank Hailey, his frosty blue eyes gleaming with rage.

"Probably," I said, "but let's not confuse the issue by beating him up in front of a *huissier*." What a dope I can be.

Joël Paotai stuck his head out the window of the van and scowled at us peevishly. From what I could see of him, he seemed

to be a short, thin Tahitian in his early forties, with curly black hair and half a dozen straggly brown teeth. It would have taken about three of him to make up one Mama Alfred. His disposition was as sweet as his breath. "Who are you guys?" he demanded. "What are you doing here?"

My client Frank Hailey was muttering angrily in English and Pierre Favre had stepped back with a detached smile to watch the proceedings, so it was up to old Caneili, the hero of the Legion, to sort things out. "We've come to see you about this house, Monsieur Paotai. This is the *huissier* Monsieur Favre and this is the person whose house it really is. I have to warn you that any damage you might cause to it between now and the time it—"

The contractor's eyes widened, and then glazed, as if he had been sandbagged behind the ear. "You've come to take my house away?" he muttered. "The cyclone already took it once . . . I won't let you take it again. . . ." His Adam's apple bobbed up and down in his scrawny throat and I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable as I kept my eyes on his unfocused brown eyes.

"It might be better," I suggested, "if you let the *huissier* do an inventory. That way—"

His eyes suddenly seemed to focus on my broad pandanus hat. "You're the one I saw in the red car," he said. "You're the one that's been following me. You're the one . . ."

His head disappeared from the window and the engine of his van roared. It lurched forward, grazing my leg as I stood there foolishly, and crashed into the metal gate with a sharp clang. I saw the driver's face smash against the windshield at the shock, and blood suddenly spurting from his nose.

Before I could get my hands through the open window and around his miserable neck, he had thrown the van into reverse and backed across the street so that it ran into the side of a shiny white Ford with an even louder clang. Up and down the street dogs began to bark insanely. The motor raced again and the Renault shot straight forward, aimed squarely at where I had been standing five seconds before.

But with sufficient motivation, even a middle-aged man can accomplish a surprising amount in five seconds. He can, for instance, levitate over a four-foot-high metal gate and take refuge behind the three-foot-thick trunk of a mango tree. I didn't see where my client or the *huissier* had disappeared to, but at least

they weren't in front of the blunt end of the van when it crashed into the gate for the second time.

The gate bulged at the impact, but finally held. I was wondering what to do next when the van backed off again, bounced off the side of the Ford, and straightened out in the middle of the narrow street. A moment later it was roaring backwards up the street towards the Route du Belvédère and the 300-foot precipice on the other side of the mountain road.

But I needn't have worried about the berserk Joël Paotai inadvertently charging across the road and off the cliff to his well-merited doom. I was a little slower climbing back over the gate than I had been when I was flying over it for my life, but I was still in plenty of time to look down the shady tunnel of trees and watch the yellow Renault reach the main road a bare instant after another car flashed by on its way home to lunch.

Without slowing, the van first waggled right as the driver tried to turn it up the hill, then waggled left as he overcorrected, then smashed into the front of my poor faithful Deux Chevaux where it was grazing peacefully in the shade of the broad flame tree. The noise was appalling. The van stalled, lurched forward, and came to a halt. My hand-painted red beauty was slammed against the tree, then as I stood rooted in shock, slowly, slowly it slued sideways. Its hood gradually sank from view as its unlovely rear end rose up in the air like a breaching ship, and then that too disappeared from view as the pride of the French auto industry slipped inexorably over the side of the cliff.

For what seemed like a long time I listened to it crashing its way down the hillside. At last there was a total silence. Even the neighborhood dogs seemed to have been shut up by the enormity of the event. I took off my plantation hat and ran a hand across my eyes. I shook my head groggily. I had been up awfully early this morning and the hot sun had been beating down on my head all day. Had I somehow been dreaming all this?

The silence was broken by my client from the North Atlantic, the schoolteacher with a Down East scowl for whom I had found a house and lost my car, the house for which the insurance jokers wouldn't pay. Now his powerful hand gripped my arm.

"Your car," he wanted to know. "Was it insured?" ●

STORYTELLER

by Lisa Lepovetsky

Pedlar McVey reigned for more than sixty years back in Willa Holler, doctorin' the folks with her herbs when they ailed and just listenin' when they needed to talk. She hiked up and down those mountain paths through seas of mud or dust, dependin' on the season, without a word of complaint. She was a constant reminder to the people who depended on her that the old ways still worked. Pedlar McVey knew what was best for the folks of Willa Holler, and they knew she knew it.

Willa Holler's dead and gone now these many years, bull dozed under to make way for a new highway and a shoppin' mall. But there are still those of us alive who remember Pedlar McVey. And I like to think there always will be.

Pedlar McVey was my mama. I don't recall ever callin' her Mama, though—everybody called her Pedlar, includin' me. Her daddy was a tinker back before the Big Depression, and wandered through the Appalachian summers with his cart and old mule, sellin' or tradin' what he could to the folks who lived in little settlements so far back in the hills that they'd never get out. One fall he just didn't come home, and that Halloween my mama was born. So Gramma called her Pedlar, in memory of her daddy. Maybe it's 'cause she was born on Halloween with a caul over her face, maybe it's 'cause her mama was a midwife, but Pedlar was always different from everybody. Even when she

Lisa Lepovetsky's grandmother came from the region in which she has set this new story, which may explain her familiarity with the traditions of oral storytelling and her understanding of the power adhering to the storyteller. The author makes her home in St. Marys, Pennsylvania, where she teaches and tells stories of her own—pen in hand. †

was little, people showed her a respect, like they knew she'd grow up to be someone special.

She always had a talent for tellin' stories that could make people understand somethin' they were havin' trouble with, or somethin' they didn't want to understand. I remember full-moon nights, nearly everybody in Willa Holler crowded into our backyard. Even the kids stayed quiet to hear her stories. She'd sit alone on the porch in the moonlight, rockin' in the old bentwood chair, her face turned up to catch the white light, her eyes closed. I still remember how the long brown braid dangled over her bony shoulder like a rope as she spun her stories.

Pedlar had tales about people she said she'd known, people who'd done somethin' real good and been rewarded, or ones who'd done somethin' real bad and been punished. She told stories about animals and their young, and about the plants and the seasons, and about the spirits who live all around us, but we can't see them because they're invisible.

But the folks of Willa Holler liked it best when she told about the Windigo. The Windigo lives in the skies and the storms, and watches over us to keep us from strayin' from the old ways. It blows through the trees and hills, bringin' the rains and snows when the seasons change. But it also carries the souls of all the dead, and when we do somethin' it doesn't like—somethin' real big that affects everybody in Willa Holler—those souls scream and cry, and somethin' terrible happens to all of us. We all loved and feared that story the most, and when Pedlar told about the Windigo, it was so quiet out there, even the crickets hushed.

Then she'd lift a finger near her ear and say, "Hush. Can you hear it? If you listen real hard, I think you'll hear the Windigo moanin' through the trees now."

And after a minute, they'd all nod, their heads bobbin' silently in the dim light from the moon and stars. I never heard anything except some leaves rustlin' back in the woods, but I know those people truly believed they heard the voice of the Windigo. It was Pedlar McVey made them believe it.

Pedlar knew everything about the woods and nature. She could make a healin' poultice out of moss and grasses growin' out by our back door, and could feed wild birds from the palm of her hand. She was tall and lean and could kill a buck with one shot from her rifle, then skin it to bare bones and a skull in no time. She used every part of the animals she killed, not just

the hide and tender meat. She dried the tougher parts for jerky, and even ground the bones for fertilizer.

In fact, it was while she was out guttin' a doe one Sunday afternoon that Livvie Barnes come by to see her. It was unusually hot for the end of September, and I was sittin' in the shade on the front porch lacin' my fingers through some string, playin' cat's cradle waitin' for Pedlar to come home with the carcass. I stopped and watched as Livvie strolled up the path, holdin' hands with a tall blond fella in a short-sleeved shirt and thin, black leather shoes that looked like they belonged on a sidewalk, not a country lane. He looked pale and red, like his skin didn't recognize the sun, and he wasn't wearin' a hat.

When they noticed me, Livvie pulled her hand from his, and plucked at the skirt of her sundress. She waved, and I waved back but didn't say anything. Livvie was four years older than me—she was almost seventeen—and she'd been stayin' with her aunt up Blue Gap way since spring. She seemed like a stranger. Blue Gap wasn't much but a hole in the wall, even back then—no more'n a few thousand folks—but it was like the big city compared to Willa Holler.

"Your ma to home, Pearl?" Livvie asked, when they'd got to the front steps.

I shrugged. I didn't take my eyes off the sweaty man beside her. He was sneerin' around at the house and yard like it was somethin' dumb somebody just said, and wipin' his face with a hanky. A deerfly buzzed around his head.

"She's down by Bintner's Spring," I said. "Killed a doe."

"Oh." Livvie glanced at the man, then back to me. "Well, this here's Raymond Harley. We're . . . we got married a couple weeks back, and I wanted Pedlar to meet him. We're gonna be livin' up on Digger's Ridge with my folks."

Now it was my turn to merely say, "Oh." I knew Pedlar'd be smokin' mad when she found out. Not that Livvie was married—hell, Pedlar'd been tryin' to get her hitched up with a couple of local boys for almost a year. She was kind of a matchmaker for the girls in the holler.

But Livvie'd gone and married an outsider. And worse yet, she'd brung him back home to Willa Holler to live. Pedlar didn't like outsiders comin' in. They always tried to change things, thinkin' they'd make Willa Holler newer and better, make our lives easier somehow. But, as Pedlar liked to say, if those ways

were better for us, we'd have thought of them our own selves.

And, of course, Pedlar was right. Raymond didn't wait a week before he was tryin' to change things around the holler. He threw the schoolteacher, old Wanda Brewer, into a huff when he waltzed into her schoolroom one afternoon and said she ought to separate some of the older children from the younger ones, the way they do in the cities. They'd learn better being with their "peers," as he called them. Wanda's face looked like a radish by the time he was finished; she came near to throwin' him out of there by the scruff of his neck. But Raymond Harley just stood there and laughed at her.

By that night, the news was all over the holler. Wanda came over to our house right after school let out. Pedlar took one look at her face and sent me right out to the barn for chores. After Wanda left, Pedlar wrapped her braid around her head and told me she was headin' up Digger's Ridge for "a word with Livvie's young man." I wasn't to wait up for her.

But I didn't need to wait up. Pedlar was back down from the ridge in no time, it seemed. When I asked whether she'd given Raymond Harley what for, she just frowned and said that some folks wouldn't recognize the truth if it jumped up and bit them in the butt.

Next day, I found out that Raymond had called Pedlar "an old busybody," and slammed himself into his bedroom. Then Pedlar'd talked to Livvie, who, it turned out, was in the family way and spent most of the conversation cryin'. Pedlar'd left her a tonic and some herbs to calm her down and told her to come around when she needed more. Everybody said Raymond was no good and would leave Livvie flat if push came to shove.

That night was a full moon, and people started arrivin' for Pedlar's storytellin' while the sky was still red and the sun was still hangin' onto the edge of the mountains. Wanda Brewer was one of the first there. She walked up with her sister Belva and Belva's husband Dan Waters. The Farley twins from the gas station and their wives came a few minutes later, and then most of the rest of the town began tricklin' in. Even Livvie Barnes and her folks showed up, but of course, Raymond was nowhere to be seen. The night was cool and damp, and many of the listeners had brought blankets to sit on.

As the moon rose, Pedlar began her story. It was about a baby bird who flies away from its nest and travels around the world

to see all the wonders it's heard about. But terrible things happen to the little bird out there. By the end of the story it flies home again, ragged and nearly dead, to be welcomed into the nest by its family, who nurse it back to health again.

I loved this story—it always made me cry. When Pedlar finished this time, I heard someone cryin' in the silence. For a terrible moment, I thought it was me, but when I looked around, I saw Livvie sittin' right behind me. Her face was buried in her hands, and she was shakin' and shiverin' with huge sobs. Her mama and daddy had their arms around her, and were rockin' her, tryin' to calm her down. Nobody else moved or said a word. They just kept watchin' Pedlar, waitin' to see what she'd do.

But Pedlar didn't do anything. She sat on her rocker, eyes still closed, her face turned up toward the golden moon, like an angel suddenly revealed in a beam of light from heaven. I realized I'd been holdin' my breath, and let it out as quietly as possible, so as not to break the spell.

Just then, Raymond Harley ran around the corner of the house. The smooth soles of his city shoes slid in the damp grass and he stumbled over to the foot of the steps and held his right hand up toward Pedlar. He had a small dark bottle clutched in his fingers. I recognized it.

"I just found this under Livvie's pillow," he said. His voice broke the silence like a stone through glass. I felt the night splinter around me.

Pedlar slowly moved her head down. Her eyes were in shadow, but we all knew she was lookin' at Raymond pacin' in the grass there below her. She said nothin'.

"I don't know what kind of garbage you've been feeding her, old woman," Raymond snarled, "but she's not taking any more. I won't have you poisoning my wife or my baby with your weeds and slime."

He threw the bottle against the back door, where it shattered like buckshot. Pedlar never moved, though the bottle whizzed by inches from her face. For a long moment, no one else moved either. Then a low murmur started, and one of the men—Dan Waters, I think—grabbed Raymond Harley from the back and got him in a neckhold. Raymond was a skinny thing, and it took next to nothin' to keep him still. Livvie was weepin' louder now, and everybody was talkin' and scurryin' around.

Pedlar stood and raised a hand. "Young man," she said, as though they'd been conversin' on the street, friendly as you please. "Young man, I don't make poisons, I make tonics and potions and poultices. What you just spilled there was a tonic I brewed from wildflowers—weeds, I guess you'd call them—and herbs. It's to help Livvie and the baby stay healthy."

Raymond scuttled around and pulled Dan's arm loose enough to croak, "Well, I was a medical student at the university, and I studied enough about pharmaceuticals to know how easy it is to poison someone with deadly plants—belladonna, toadstools, and so on. I don't trust your witchdoctoring, and no wife of mine is going to take that kind of chance."

"I don't put toadstools in my tonics," Pedlar said calmly. "And if Livvie doesn't want them, she doesn't have to drink them."

Raymond jerked away from Dan and glared at his little wife, huddled between her parents. "Livvie?"

She looked up, first at Pedlar, then at Raymond. Her eyes were wet and wide, like a doe's. "I want the tonic," she whispered. "It helps me to feel better."

Raymond shook his head, disgusted-like, then stomped off around the house. Pedlar went inside to get another bottle, and everyone relaxed. People began driftin' off home.

It was more than two weeks later that Raymond rushed up to Pedlar as she led Sunday meetin'. Livvie hadn't been to meetin' that day, but everybody knew her daddy's mare was about to foal, and figured they'd all stayed home to help. But Raymond never came to meetin', so everything stopped when he showed up.

He marched down between the seats till he was near nose-to-nose with Pedlar. She never winced nor moved aside when he pointed his pale finger in her face.

"Well, *doctor-woman*," he sneered, "you'd better come up to Digger's Ridge. Livvie's sick."

"How sick?"

"She's been up most of the night vomiting, and she's burning up with fever."

Pedlar hurried between the chairs toward the door, with Raymond following. "Why didn't you call me sooner?" she asked.

"To tell the truth, I was afraid to get you involved."

Pedlar stopped and turned toward him, hands on hips. "Afraid?"

Raymond spoke slowly and loudly. I thought he was talkin' to the whole room, but he only looked at Pedlar.

"You brought a new batch of tonic yesterday. I thought there might be something . . . wrong with it."

Pedlar moved a step toward him, her eyes like granite. "You fool," she whispered, "you damn fool." Then she turned on her heel and was out the door.

I understand it was touch and go with Livvie for nearly a week there, and she lost the baby. But she gradually regained her strength. I stayed with Dan and Belva Waters while Pedlar was up on Digger's Ridge nursin' Livvie. I heard Belva tell Wanda Brewer that Pedlar wouldn't allow Raymond in Livvie's room until that fever broke, and even after that she wouldn't let him alone with her the whole week.

When Pedlar and I finally got home, I fixed us a dinner of canned venison and yams. I'd never seen her look so tired, and I thought I saw more grey hairs peekin' through the brown ones in her braid. I knew she didn't want to talk, so I kept silent. Every so often, she'd quit eatin' and stare out the window, even though it was dark as pitch out there. Then she'd shake her head sadly and go back to her dinner.

After dinner, Pedlar sat in the parlor, her mending basket tucked in her lap. She wasn't sewin', though, just pickin' through the threads kinda halfheartedly, windin' them back on their spools. Seemed like she was waitin' for somethin'. The way the light cut across her face, she looked a hundred years old. I felt a chill. I kissed her on the cheek, and went up to bed.

The next mornin', I woke up early to someone poundin' on the front door. Pedlar was already paddin' down the steps in her bare feet, so I snuggled deeper into the comforter and waited for her to come back up and tell me who it was. I heard rain beatin' against the window. Probably somebody's baby was down with the croup.

But Pedlar was down there a long time. I finally crept out onto the cold wooden floor and snuck partway down the steps. Through the banisters, I saw Mr. Barnes slumped in the big sofa next to Pedlar, lookin' old and sick. He held his hat in his hands, but his overcoat was still on. He shook his head, lookin' at the floor.

"I knowed it'd be comin' to this, Pedlar," he said. "Livvie be terrible sad. She's allus been a wild un—it's why we done sent

her to my sister. But she don't deserve such badness."

Pedlar touched his arm. "Maybe it's not so bad," she said quietly. He looked up.

She continued. "I mean, was she happy with him?" Mr. Barnes shook his head.

"Well, maybe she can find herself again now on her own. Or maybe he'll come back. Either way, it's out of our hands." She rose. "I'll make you some chamomile tea, and then you be gettin' home," she said. "Your family needs you."

He left an hour later, calmer. The week went by, and the story of Raymond's desertion made the rounds. By the next Sunday, Livvie found the strength to make her way to meetin', and everybody acted as though nothin' at all had happened out of the ordinary. She was back in the fold.

The next night was full moon again. The moon had risen like a blood-red eye through the trees by the time Pedlar began the story of the Windigo. She kept her eyes closed and her face tilted upward like usual, but there was somethin' about her voice that was different—somethin' dark and cold that made me shiver in my sheepskin coat. Clouds scudded across the sky, bringin' in a cold autumn rain, and Pedlar's face faded in and out of the moonlight like a ghost.

And when she finished, she opened her eyes. "Hush," she whispered. "Can you hear it? If you listen real hard, I think you'll hear the Windigo moanin' through the trees now."

Just then, a cold wind whipped through the trees in the holler, and everybody nodded—including me. For the first time in my life, I heard the Windigo, and it scared me to the roots of my heart. I never want to hear that sound again.

Because I found the Windigo the next day. The wind was still blowin', and I followed that awful sound to the open place next to Bintner's Spring where Pedlar had killed the doe more than a month before. I looked up into the trees and saw a man's skull tucked into the crotch of a willow branch, groanin' as the wind blew through a neat round hole above the right eye socket. And it didn't take me long to find a single thin black shoe behind a rock, a shoe that never belonged in this kind of country. ●



SANCTUARY

by Alex Mironoff

The thing is," he confided darkly to his wife, "you can't let them know that you see them coming."

He chuckled compulsively for a few seconds, regained his composure, and, smiling slyly, continued. "You go in very calm and normal, but once you're inside and out of sight, you hit the button as fast as you can, see? And by the time they make it to the door, you're on your way up, or down, or whatever." A laugh broke through his last words.

"And they think—they think—" here he became barely intelligible, "they think you just didn't see them coming. But all the time you were planning it, timing it so that the doors would shut in their goddamn faces!"

Georgina smiled tentatively. The lightly creased corners of her mouth twitched irresolutely, as if jerked repeatedly by fine subcutaneous threads.

"I suppose . . ." she began.

"At first I wasn't very good at it. I used to miss a lot," he added, a tinge of disappointment coloring his voice.

"They'd punch the call button before I ever got off the ground

Alex Mironoff is something of an expert on corporate training, having published two articles on the subject in business journals, so it seems fitting that his fiction debut should be a reflection on the troubles of a corporate misfit. The author recently retired from business to pursue a Ph.D. in experimental psychology at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. †

and the doors would open up again. Then I'd have to make some stupid excuse about pushing the wrong button by mistake, and it would be spoiled. I'd have to ride up with them and act like it was okay. But I got better," and here his voice regained its former bright and confident hue, "and no one ever catches me like that now!"

Georgina sighed. Her smile crumbled like a stale cracker. "I have some Valium," she said. "It'll relax you."

"Don't you see? That's how I get back at them. I wait until the last possible minute and . . ."

"Gordon," Georgina interrupted, "you really should learn to unwind after work."

Then she laid her hands on his slightly clammy neck and with her thumbs began to knead the familiar twisted cords that snaked across his upper back. She had learned, as most wives do, never to confront issues directly.

A pause worked its way into his impassioned tirade. Then the pause became a protracted silence. The multitude of knots in his back began to unravel. His excited shallow gasps turned into slow deep breaths. He closed his eyes and slept, dreaming of the neatly dressed hordes that pursued him daily to the tall, sleek doors of finely brushed, softly gleaming, and incorruptible steel. The doors parted slowly, majestically. The half-light of the paneled chamber beckoned to him with whispered promises of solitude and peace. He entered swiftly, as though eager to get on with a day's affairs, and with a subtle gesture, visible only to himself, caused the massive doors to close before the pale and distraught faces of his pursuers.

The chamber surged upward. He felt the heaviness of his body as the rising floor pushed against his feet. Then, as the car gained speed, he began to fly upward effortlessly—at one with his paneled haven. He laughed out loud. He shouted things that he scarcely dared to think when surrounded by his peers. He danced, bounding from one smooth, wood-paneled wall to the other. And when the car reached its ultimate destination, he exited calmly, confidently, no trace remaining of his solitary orgy of liberation. He knew that, for now, he had outdistanced them. He had moved through a mysterious void into another dimension. He himself had been transformed. They would never recognize him, never find him again.

Then he saw Karstens looking expectantly in his direction. His stomach tensed. He turned back to the doors of the elevator. He clawed at the brushed steel surface that, a moment ago, had protected him. He forced his fingers into the fine groove between the doors. A hand tugged at his neck, and in a desperate, nail-splintering effort, spurred on by the mad fears of which dreams are made, he pried apart the slabs of cold, hard steel and plummeted, screaming, into the darkness below.

The scream persisted as he struggled into wakefulness. Georgina jumped back. Her trembling hands fell away from his neck, which was oozing droplets of icy perspiration.

"Honey, please," she pleaded, perplexed by the odd behavior of her spouse. Georgina bore a name that had been given her on the premise that she would be a male child. In fact, only the moderating influence of her mother had actually kept her from becoming "George." She had grown up sensing her inadequacy so keenly that, by the time she reached maturity, she had, in fact, become inadequate. Unschooled in the complexities of life, she grasped vainly for solutions to her latest problem, and by way of solution, could offer only this plaintive, "Honey, please . . ."

Gordon wasn't listening. He had stopped screaming upon discovering that he wasn't really plunging into the dark oblivion of a twenty-three-story elevator shaft. He had not, however, stopped sweating.

"It's the only place I have left," he confided to Georgina. "Karstens and the others are always everywhere I look. The only place I can get away from them is on the elevator. They can't get at me when I'm moving between the floors. And the best thing about it is that while I'm on it, I'm not really anywhere. Don't you see?"

His voice had become more somber; he was talking less excitedly than before.

"I've started taking the slow one—the freight, you know? Or if I'm sure of getting on alone, I take one of those in the lobby, push the Express button, and ride it all the way to the twenty-third floor before I come back to five."

He took in a breath and let his thoughts drift to some distant, long-neglected corner of his mind. Georgina dug her fingers into his shoulders.

"Karstens . . ." Gordon said mechanically, his tongue laboriously interrupting the slow jet of air as it was expelled from his lungs.

It was at last year's company Christmas party—the typical kaleidoscopic display of drunken faces.

"So you're Gordo's little woman, eh?" Karstens said to Georgina. "Pleeztameetcha." A wet, bourbon-tainted kiss on the lips. Bristles of neglected five o'clock shadow that even Gordon could see, moist with alcoholic sweat. A patch of irritated skin showed bright red near Georgina's mouth. She smiled weakly, uncertainly.

"Quite a looker, Gordo. Why is she wasting her time with a loser like you? Ha ha!"

Gordon's face turned an even pastier white than usual. Perhaps it was the liquor. Karstens and the others faded away. Georgina had disappeared. In the darkness, he heard voices:

" . . . had too much," " . . . never could hold his liquor," " . . . be all right. Don't worry."

Gordon again became conscious of the hands kneading his shoulders. This time the sensation did not frighten him.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you, Georgie girl."

He called her a name remembered from a movie they had seen in college, and in doing so, came as close to displaying overt affection as he could.

The massage continued. Tears born of helpless bitterness rolled down Georgina's cheeks and stained her white blouse. Gordon couldn't see them.

"It's not fair," she said. "It's just not fair."

In the morning, Gordon awoke to his usual combination of tense stomach and well-balanced breakfast. He tried not to think of the office, but since all his movements were directed towards delivering himself there in a timely fashion, he could hardly conceal from himself the reason behind all the desperate activity. If there was no office, then why was he so frantically attempting to produce a proper knot in his frayed and slightly misshapen tie?

He was kissed noncommittally by Georgina as he left. The events of the night before were not mentioned. He sped to work, his mind gravitating to thoughts of his personal sanctuary: the

sleek steel doors, the warm oaken interior, the soft glow of the lights, and most of all, the sense of complete dissociation from his burdensome environment.

He was late. He stood in the lobby alone, before the shiny doors of his express, waiting impatiently for the three bell tones and green light that would signal its readiness to accept him. He glanced about nervously and glimpsed a figure coming through the revolving glass doors that led to the parking garage. It was Karstens, exercising yet another *droit du seigneur*. Gordon scratched at the ridge of flesh that framed his thumbnail. He trapped a bit of lower lip between his teeth, and a bead of salty blood crept onto his tongue.

Not him, he thought, not now.

The elevator came. The bell rang gently, three times. A moment's pause. The panels of brushed steel began to part and Gordon glanced involuntarily at the approaching bearlike figure to reassure himself that it was not too late. His eyes briefly met Karstens's. The stainless steel doors stood open. Gordon hesitated, and then flung himself into the corner of the elevator closest to the control panel. He slammed the number twenty-three with the heel of his hand and pressed Express with his thumb. The tip of his thumb began to turn white from the pressure.

At first nothing happened. Then, the doors slid slowly and noiselessly together. Through the narrowing gap Gordon could see his manager's features contorted with rage as he drew within striking distance of the call button. The elevator stood for a moment, doors closed as if considering whether or not to surrender its occupant to his outraged superior. Then, with a slight tremor, it glided upward.

Gordon's breath came in short bursts. He realized what he had done. Yet he also knew that, for the time being, he was safe. But for how long? Thirty seconds? Forty-five? What would he do then? How could he explain this most unforgivable of all affronts—a slave's defiance of his legally designated master's rights? Deception was impossible. Gordon was one of those relatively guileless, apolitical souls who blushed and stuttered when telling a lie, especially when his interrogator was a person in authority.

The car sped to the twenty-third floor. There was no question of going back to five today. Karstens would be waiting by the

elevator doors: face red, neck even more truncated than usual, and beefy hands flexing in unconscious preparation for a physical assault that would never come. Instead, all his rage would be channeled through a mouth that had never been particularly discriminating about what it took in or put out. Gordon had been subjected a number of times to this verbal violence for comparatively trifling offenses: being a minute or two late to a meeting, forgetting to copy Karstens on a memo of no importance, making a mistake in the Cents column of the annual departmental budget. He could imagine what was in store for him now. But imagining this wasn't bringing him any closer to solving his problem.

The car stopped. Gordon heard the three soft bell tones sounding for the benefit of any passengers waiting on the twenty-third floor. He fought the instinct to stay aboard. The possibility of being delivered to the fifth floor and into Karstens's eagerly flexing paws overcame whatever reservations he might have had, and so he dashed out into the twenty-third-floor lobby.

The twenty-third floor was where the loftiest of executives resided. Here, among the richly carpeted halls and spacious offices, strewn with expensive knickknacks, they drank deep draughts of company-subsidized coffee or scotch, pleasures summarily denied to those of lesser status. Even Karstens would not dare to order a pot of coffee for his staff meeting or keep a bottle of liquor in his credenza. This was against company policy.

Gordon had never really explored the twenty-third floor. His prior visitations had been limited to the elevator and, very occasionally, to the lobby, whose secure precincts he was now leaving behind him. Instead of striding confidently, as though he knew where he was going, Gordon clung to the wall of the corridor, nearly bringing down an expensive original lithograph that depicted a large green blob in the process of engulfing a lesser orange one. Fortunately for him, this was the day of the monthly vice-presidential staff meeting, an event which usually left the corridors and offices of the twenty-third floor vacant. Even the secretaries were not on their regular perches. On such undeclared holidays, the self-styled debutantes of the executive suite usually elected one of their number to sit at the main reception area, so that they could repair to the ladies room to exchange the latest trivia regarding work, home, and family. Thus it was

that Gordon's unusual behavior was not detected and that his future at the company was determined.

He advanced cautiously, pressing against the wall and glancing, it seemed, in all directions at once. Yet, for all the feverish scanning, he took in little of what he saw, and having taken a few tentative steps into unknown territory, he inadvertently leaned against the skillfully camouflaged door that led to the executive restroom. The door yielded to his weight and, unprepared for the sudden disappearance of this supporting wall, he fell onto the elegantly tiled floor of what was popularly referred to as the "Big John." Gordon had never before seen such a lavishly appointed bathroom. It was a montage of marble, mirrors, terrazzo tile, and gold, gleaming softly in the subdued light. It was a place unlike any other in the building. No harsh lights, no vinyl floors, no Karstens. Karstens? He would never live long enough to see this place. This was a retreat reserved exclusively for vice-presidential bowels and, perhaps, if he played his cards right, for Gordon's.

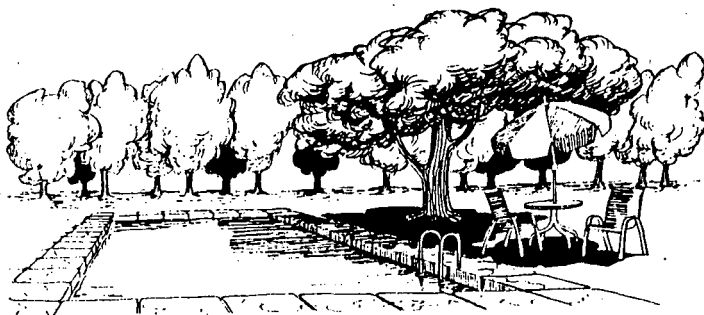
Gordon got to his feet. He stepped into the corner stall and shut the door behind him. Surprisingly, the oversized toilet was fitted with a lid. Gordon sat down. Here was a place that was even more secure than the elevator. Here he would have time to think, to formulate strategy, to outmaneuver those who had been torturing him for fifteen long years. He thought all morning. By noon he had a plan. By quitting time he had begun to carry it out.

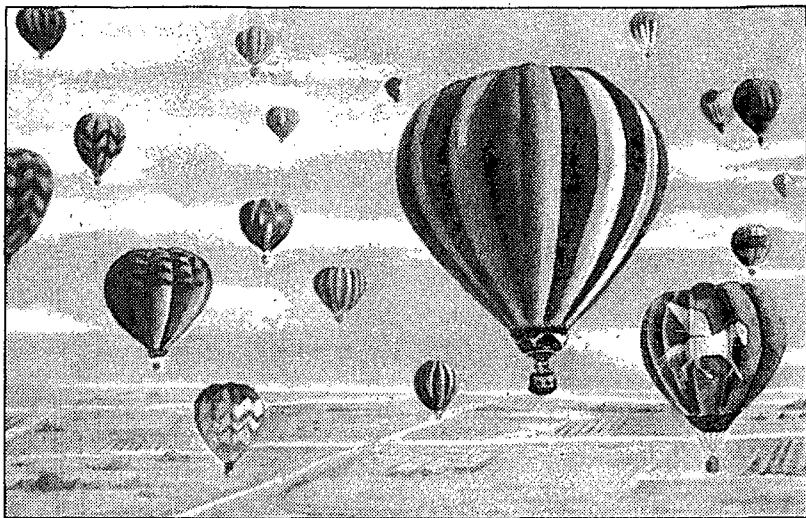
Karstens fired Gordon *in absentia* and wrote a fiery denunciation of him for inclusion in his employee file: "outright insubordination," "failed to notify supervisor of unauthorized absence from work and reasons for absence," "marginal performer at best," "do not rehire." Georgina at first doubted the feasibility of Gordon's plan, but having been well trained to roll over and accept whatever fate dished out, she did not actively oppose his decision. After all, the alternative was to have him committed, an act which was not merely unthinkable, but counterproductive to her own interests as a wife and homemaker.

The transformation in Gordon occurred almost immediately. He began going to work cheerfully, his new briefcase stuffed with a hearty lunch and the latest bestseller. He came home happy and rested, even when his new assignment demanded that he work overtime. Georgina never regretted their decision,

and both lived lives that were as fulfilled as one could expect in people of this caliber. Gordon made the executive washroom his base of operation. He learned the ins and outs of every administrative and computer system in the company. At first, this necessitated working the graveyard shift, but it was joyous, exhilarating work. In fact, the company in the dead of night seemed a much more friendly place than it ever had in the chaos of day. As a first order of business, Gordon got himself put back on the payroll (under an assumed name, of course). He arranged to have his checks mailed to a post-office box, gave himself regular but fair raises, and occasionally terminated himself, only to come aboard again under a new name in a subsequent week. Because, like most serious wage slaves, Gordon sincerely believed that the work he had been performing was of vital importance to corporate growth and profitability, he dutifully continued to churn out and distribute voluminous administrative reports from his new office using a lap-top computer lifted in a midnight raid on Sales & Marketing. Of course, no one noticed either the absence of the lap-top or the presence of the superfluous paper that Gordon generated over the years. Because he was not a greedy person, the company never noticed the small trickle of funds that he diverted to pay himself for his invaluable contribution to the corporate bottom line. And thanks to the ample seating capacity of the executive washrooms, no one ever noticed that one stall or another was always occupied.

Gordon retired many years later on an ample pension. He often spoke to Georgina, during the long sunny days on the beach at Tarpon Springs, about how much he missed his job. ●





AN ABUNDANCE OF AIRBAGS

by Edward D. Hoch

The first thing Susan Holt saw as her rented car topped the rise in the area south of Des Moines was a field of huge multicolored balloons swaying gently in the afternoon breeze. Somehow she hadn't expected so many, even though she knew it was ballooning country, with the National Balloon Museum not far away. At the car rental place they'd thought she was bound for the Madison County covered bridges like most of the other summer tourists in the area.

"Warren County is right here," the perky attendant had pointed out on the map, "but are you sure it's not Madison County you want?"

"Balloons, not bridges," Susan had insisted.

And here they were, spread out before her, their big colorful bags painted with basic stripes and elaborate designs, familiar corporate logos and rare mythological creatures. One was even a pretty good replica of the Montgolfiers' classic design from 1783.

Susan had flown and driven here from Manhattan because Mayfield's department store was planning a fall promotion built around the theme of ballooning — "Values Up, Prices Down" — and it was her job to organize and promote the event. They needed blown-up photographs, personal appearances by balloonists, and even, if possible, one of the more colorful balloons itself. She had written and spoken to a balloon enthusiast named Duncan Rowe, and this was the man she'd come to see.

She guessed there were more than twenty balloons in the open field, all inflated and ready to be released from their tethers. Along the far end of the field were two rows of parked cars and Susan pulled in beside the last one. A blond man in his twenties, wearing khaki pants and a Balloon Federation of America T-shirt, was standing by a white convertible with the top down. "You chasing?" he asked.

"Pardon me?"

"Are you a chase car for one of the balloons?" He smiled, showing perfect white teeth.

"No, I'm looking for Duncan Rowe."

"You came to the right person. He's my uncle."

"Really?"

"Come on, I'll introduce you. He's right over here."

"I'm Susan Holt, from New York. I've spoken to him on the phone."

Edward D. Hoch, the genre's most prolific short-story writer, currently has seven series running regularly in *EQMM*. Rand and Dr. Sam, Nick Velvet and Ben Snow, Michael Vlado and Leopold have been with us for a long time. Recently the author added a female detective to their number, the intrepid Susan Holt. We expect him to give her long life, so look for more Holt adventures in upcoming issues. †

"Philip Rowe. Glad to meet you."

She couldn't help noticing his muscular arms and body as she followed him across the grass to a red-and-white-striped balloon. The girls in her office would have called him a hunk. The slender gray-haired man in the basket of the balloon had the same smile and she knew at once that this was Duncan Rowe, Philip's uncle.

"We've talked so many times, I feel I know you," she told him when Philip had introduced them.

Duncan Rowe's smile widened. "You're even more charming in person. May I call you Susan?"

"Certainly. And this is Daisy?"

Duncan Rowe chuckled. "My nephew tells me only eccentric old men name their balloons after women, but I think of her as a Daisy." As he spoke he was feeding propane from one of the cylinders to the overhead burner coil that heated the air inside the bag. To Susan's eyes, it seemed fully inflated already.

"I'd love to go up in one of these sometime," she told him.

"No time like the present! Hop aboard!"

"No, no—I'm not dressed for it," she insisted, glancing down at the skirt she'd worn on the plane.

"I can probably find you a pair of jeans," Philip volunteered.

"No. Another time." The inflated balloons were beginning to bump each other as they prepared to ascend. "When can I speak with you about the Mayfield's promotion?"

"It's now or never," he told her with a grin. "Come on! I need a passenger to balance the basket."

"Your nephew—"

"He's chasing in the car."

Susan Holt sighed. He didn't really need her, she knew, but if she was going to make friends with the man, this was the easiest way to do it. "All right, give me five minutes. I have a pair of slacks in my garment bag."

"Five minutes, lads!" Duncan Rowe shouted to the ground crew as they tugged at the basket to hold it down. He turned down the fuel valve as she sprinted toward her car, feeling just a bit foolish.

She unzipped the garment bag, pulled the slacks from their hanger, and slouched down in the backseat while she pulled them on over her pantyhose. The wraparound skirt was

quickly unsnapped and discarded. She was out of the car and on her way back in three minutes.

Philip Rowe handed her a yellow crash helmet. "Here—wear this."

"Your uncle's not wearing one."

"He thinks he's indestructible."

She buckled the helmet under her chin and accepted Philip's hand as he helped her into the woven wooden basket. Duncan Rowe immediately turned the fuel valve and the burner above their heads gave a deep-throated roar. The basket lurched as the ground crew relaxed their hold. "Have a good flight!" Philip shouted above the roar.

"How much does that airbag hold?" Susan shouted into Duncan Rowe's ear as they rose quickly off the ground. Learning the mechanics of something had always been her method of calming fear.

"First off, young lady, they're no longer called airbags. Those are found in automobiles these days. This is simply a bag, or more properly an envelope. Large ones can hold nearly a quarter-million cubic feet of air. This is only about half that size. As the air is heated it expands, and the upthrust lifts the balloon. I control it by means of vents near the top which can be opened and closed. Also, of course, more fuel will send us higher and less fuel will bring us down."

Susan had overcome her initial fright and took time now to inspect the interior of the basket. It held cylinders of propane fuel for the burner in three of the corners, connected in series so they could be consumed one after the other. There was also a small fire extinguisher attached to the bottom of the thick gauge box containing an altimeter, compass, and other dials. Two straps to control the envelope flaps hung down from overhead. There were gauges on each of the fuel cylinders as well, and a dropline for help in landing.

"Hold on tight with both hands," Rowe warned her as they rose past the treetops. "If we hit those you don't want to be thrown out!"

"Is it a dangerous sport?"

"One of our people was killed last week," he answered grimly.

"Really?"

"A good friend named Bruce Manchester. He'd been ballooning for twenty years without a mishap. He went up alone and somewhere above the treetops he simply fell out. He was dead the instant he hit the ground."

"Suicide?"

Duncan Rowe shook his head. "I can't believe it. He was happily married, in perfect health. His insurance business was thriving."

"A heart attack?"

"The autopsy showed nothing. And no injuries except those caused by the fall."

They glided past the final treetop and she relaxed her grip on the basket. Rowe turned off the burner and they drifted along in silence, enjoying the panorama of the countryside. "How high are we?" she asked, gazing down at a dozen colorful balloons below them.

He consulted the altimeter. "Close to two thousand feet." He flicked on a switch and the burner roared above her head, sending them higher. She was glad the helmet helped shield her hair from the heat. "We have to stay below the commercial airplanes but we can go up to five thousand feet in this area."

The wicker basket was four feet square and could probably have held two more passengers. In her mind she pictured kids climbing over it at Mayfield's. "Could we have this basket and balloon for our fall promotion at the store?"

"You mean inflated?"

"No, no—our ceilings aren't high enough. But this basket is pretty neat and the deflated balloon could be draped above it."

"Why my balloon?" He gestured below them, where the others seemed to play tag with a passing cloud. "Kevin Nova has a Pegasus graphic on his. Mine's just stripes."

"People can see Pegasus at their gas station. And the more elaborate designs don't show up well when the balloon's deflated. We could use blown-up photographs of them around the store, though."

"What would you pay for all this?" he asked, cutting off the fuel again.

"I have a contract in my car."

He looked down over the side. "There's Philip and his girl, following us in the chase car. Perhaps it's time we took Daisy down."

"How do you land this thing?"

"Downwind, using the burner and maneuvering vent. If I can't land it without help I'll deploy the dropline for Philip and Rita. Once on the ground the fuel system is shut off and the deflation port is opened to release the remaining hot air. The balloon collapses and we gather it into a long cylinder for packing into the envelope carry sack."

While he spoke he'd decreased the amount of fuel to the burner and the balloon began losing altitude. Susan watched the needle on the altimeter as it sank below a thousand feet. "What are these other gauges?"

"The variometer measures the rate of climb and the pyrometer indicates the temperature of the air in our envelope. This one is a compass, of course."

The ground was coming up fast and she took a firm grip on the basket, bracing for the shock. The basket bumped once as it hit and then toppled over on its side. She was bounced around but climbed out gamely as Philip and his girl came running up.

"Are you all right?" Duncan Rowe's nephew asked.

"I'll survive."

"This is Rita Bloom. Susan Holt."

Rita was in her early twenties, a fresh-faced young woman with hair the color of Iowa corn tassels. It wasn't until she opened her mouth that Susan recognized the unmistakable New York accent. "I came out here to attend Drake University and after graduation I just stayed," she explained when Susan questioned her. She had a way of gesturing as she spoke. "It's so much more open than Manhattan."

Looking around at the cornfields, Susan had to agree with her. "You ever been up in one of those?" she asked, gesturing toward the rapidly deflating balloon after removing her helmet.

"Oh, sure! Philip took me up a couple of times. It's not so bad after your first flight."

A red pickup truck had turned off the road and was bumping across the field toward them. The side of the door read *Glen's Auto Repair*, and Rowe identified the man who jumped out as Glen Leavor. "Glen picks up all the pieces for us, transports the baskets and bags back home."

Leavor was around thirty, dark-haired and with a shadow

of beard on his chin. Susan imagined he was quite the hit with local ladies who might find Philip Rowe beyond their reach. "Pleased to meet you," he said, making a halfhearted effort to tip his baseball cap. "Want to give me a hand with this basket, Phil?"

The two of them lifted the wicker carriage by carrying handles near the bottom and hoisted it onto the truck. Glen helped gather the collapsed balloon into a cylinder and pack it into its carry sack.

"We're having drinks at our place for the balloonists," Duncan Rowe told him. "When you deliver that stuff come in for some refreshments."

"I'll do that," Leavor said. "See you!"

"He's a big help," Philip said as the truck pulled away, heading for a big green balloon that was just landing nearby. "We all chip in to pay him."

"Do you always have a party after flights?" Susan asked.

Duncan Rowe smiled. "Sometimes. This one's partly for your benefit, so you can meet some of the people. They're a great bunch. Most would do better than me in New York."

The Rowe house was situated on a small rise at the end of an impressive driveway. Despite some colonial touches, it was a modern home with spacious rooms and a state-of-the-art kitchen. "Duncan's wife Diana passed away last summer," Rita Bloom explained as she and Susan entered through the kitchen door. "It was a great shock to everyone."

"Had she been ill?"

"Not ill. She was—"

Duncan entered just behind them, ending the conversation. It was obvious that he took great pride in the house and he insisted on giving Susan a tour while they waited for the others to arrive. "I hope I can lure you away from all this for our fall promotion," Susan told him. "It's beautiful country here."

"Especially beautiful seen from the air." He showed her his oak-paneled den, where posters and photos of balloons in flight dominated the room. There were shelves of books on the sport, too, and a few gold trophies Duncan had won. Susan paused over a framed picture of Duncan and a handsome middle-aged woman holding one of them. There were other pictures of her on the walls.

"Your wife?" Susan asked.

"Yes." He said nothing more on the subject.

They returned from the tour to find the house filling up with men and women, mostly in their thirties and forties. They were handsome, athletic people with the money to buy, maintain, and fly the balloons she'd admired earlier. Duncan introduced her to a few of them before his nephew called him out to the kitchen where there was a problem with the hors d'oeuvres.

She found herself finally with a slender, bearded young man with the appearance of a sea captain. His name was Kevin Nova and she immediately recognized it. "You're Pegasus! I mean you have it on your balloon!"

"That's right," he confirmed with a smile. "How'd you know?"

"I was up with Duncan today and he pointed it out. I remembered your name. That's quite a balloon!"

"Thank you. It always attracts attention at the races. And you must be the lady from the New York store that's going to fill the place with our balloons."

"Well, pictures mostly. But we do hope to have one or two deflated bags, along with their baskets and accessories. I think it would be a great attraction."

"Do you want Pegasus?"

Susan made a snap decision. "I do, if I can think of a way to display it. Our ceilings—"

"I was in Mayfield's once on a trip to New York. Isn't there an area between the first-floor escalators that's quite high and open?"

He was right, of course. "We have about fifty feet there," she agreed. "But your balloons are higher than that when inflated."

"We could partially inflate them, enough to show the design, and hold them up with wires. It's got to be faked somehow anyway, since I doubt that you want the burners going to heat the air."

"How else can you keep them inflated?"

"With gas. Some European balloonists still use hydrogen or helium, though hydrogen is very dangerous. You don't want a fire. A small amount of helium would do the job. We don't have to fly off anywhere."

"We certainly don't want a fire," she agreed. "This is a fairly dangerous sport, isn't it?"

Kevin Nova smiled down at her. He was half a head taller than she and when he stood this close she was quite aware of having to look up at him. "Why do you say that?"

"Duncan mentioned a Bruce Manchester who fell out of his balloon last week."

"Yes. A terrible tragedy, but it was no accident. I was right below him when it happened. Just before he fell I'll swear I heard a loud crack like a gunshot. Then his body came hurtling past me."

"You're saying he was shot?"

"I don't know. The autopsy found no bullet wound. But that's what I heard."

"You think he shot himself?"

"Or someone else shot him."

Susan shook her head, trying to grasp it. "But he was alone, wasn't he?"

"He was alone," Nova agreed. "The balloon got tangled in the treetops and had to be hauled out by Leavor and some others. It was a mess. But then Manchester was something of a mess too after falling a couple of thousand feet. Of course, when there was no bullet wound, no one believed my story of hearing a shot."

"It must have been something else. His foot might have hit something in the basket as he fell."

"Nothing would make that noise. Besides, he wasn't the first accident."

"He wasn't?" She had the feeling she was about to learn something she'd rather not know.

"Duncan's wife Diana died the same way last summer."

Glen Leavor and some others had arrived while she talked with Nova, and the repairman announced that everyone's balloon had been safely recovered and delivered. Apparently some of the group kept their equipment at home in the garage while those cramped for space rented storage sheds nearby. Susan spotted Rita Bloom just handing Leavor a drink and went to join them. He was the sort who kept his baseball cap on in the house but he seemed pleasant enough as he conversed with Rita.

"Listen, Glen," she was saying, "if I can go up in one of those things anyone can. I'll get Philip to take us both up next week."

He held up his free hand in mock alarm. "No, I feel safer on the ground. Sometimes when I pick up the bags after an accident they're punctured and shredded. I don't want to be in one if that happens."

"I hear there was an accident just last week," Susan interjected. "Manchester's balloon was punctured."

"It ran into a tree," Leavor said, taking a sip of his drink.

"Could something have punctured the bag before Manchester fell?"

Rita smiled at her. "You've been listening to Kevin and his story about hearing a shot. When they couldn't find a bullet in Manchester, Kevin decided it must have punctured the envelope and the sudden deflation threw Bruce out of the basket. But it couldn't have happened that way. First of all, he wouldn't have heard a distant shot so clearly. Whatever he heard, he thought it came from right above them, where Manchester's basket was. Second, a tiny bullet hole wouldn't have deflated that huge envelope so quickly. It would have been more like a slow leak."

"The balloon drifted on for several minutes after Manchester fell," Glen Leavor confirmed. "I was watching it from the ground with the others in their chase cars. The burner was off and it just gradually drifted lower until it got snagged in the trees."

"Someone told me Mrs. Rowe died the same way last Summer."

Rita seemed to pale a bit at the words, but she was quick to correct them. "No, Diana's death was entirely different. It was a terrible blow to Duncan."

"Didn't she fall from a balloon?"

It was Leavor who answered. "That was suicide. She left a note for Duncan. He has it framed. She'd flown with him and knew how to handle the balloon. That day she took it up without any chase car. She knew she wouldn't need one."

"It was terrible for him," Rita confirmed. "He was a wreck for months."

"I'm glad to see he seems to have recovered," Susan said.

"He's getting there, slowly."

Duncan Rowe joined them at that point and the conversation ceased. He'd had a few drinks and Susan could see it was no

time to talk business. "Could we get together tomorrow," she asked, "and go over the contract?"

"Contract? Sure, anything for you. Want to go for another ride with me?"

"I don't think so. Tomorrow I'll stay on firm ground."

He let his eyes wander over the other guests, finally settling on Nova. "Kevin, are you going up tomorrow?"

"I wasn't planning on it," the bearded man replied.

"I'll race you, one on one."

"Ah, Duncan—"

"I'd lay money on that race!" Leavor announced. "Five hundred on Duncan to win!" Within minutes his bet was covered by the others. They agreed on a ten A.M. race, weather permitting.

"I never thought balloon racing was a gambling sport," Susan remarked to Duncan Rowe. "I'll see you tomorrow." It was time to call it a day.

She was up early and left her motel by nine, hoping she could catch Duncan at home before the race. But when she reached the house only Rita Bloom was there, loading the dishwasher with breakfast things. "You just missed him. Philip is driving him over to the launching field where we were yesterday."

"I'm sorry," Susan admitted. "If there's going to be another champagne celebration after this one I'll never get my contracts signed."

"We'll try to keep him under control." There was something grim about her tone of voice that Susan couldn't help noticing.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing. Philip says it's foolish, that I read too many detective stories."

"Why's that?"

"I'm worried about this race. I keep thinking there might be another accident, like what happened to Mr. Manchester last week."

"Why should there be another?"

"Well, that's the part Philip says is foolish. You see, Duncan was supposed to take that balloon up. It was called the Starburst, with a dark blue envelope and random white spots for stars. At the last minute Mr. Manchester wanted it so they switched and Duncan took Daisy like he usually does. If

someone did kill Mr. Manchester, maybe they were after Duncan."

It sounded crazy, but Susan had learned that the truth was often crazy. "Come on," she said. "Let's get over there."

The field, when they reached it, presented a quite different sight from the previous day. There were almost as many cars and onlookers, but now only two of the hot-air balloons were in position and fully inflated. "Pegasus and Daisy," Rita observed. "There they are."

Susan drove past the waiting Pegasus, barely acknowledging Kevin's wave from the basket. She parked up close to Daisy and darted across the trampled grass to the big red-and-white-striped balloon. "Duncan! Wait!"

"Wait for what?" he asked, turning the fuel valve up a bit. "You can't join me today, Susan, much as I'd like you to."

She gripped the edge of the basket from the outside, examining every inch of it, searching for anything out of the ordinary, but it was exactly as it had been the previous day. Certainly there was no danger there, no frayed ropes or loosened fastenings.

"We have to release it," Philip shouted. "Kevin is taking off!"

"All right," she said with a sigh, letting go of the basket, smothering her fears with a smile and wave to Duncan. "Good luck!"

Daisy was off the ground only seconds after Pegasus, rising straight up into the clear morning sky. "Come on, if you want to chase it," Philip yelled to Rita and Susan. They piled into his white convertible and took off. The course was to be ten kilometers—six miles—across the open countryside over flat farmlands with a minimum of trees, he explained as he drove. It was a short race as races go, but the one-on-one challenge had been more sport than serious competition.

Susan glanced back to see a line of cars following them. She recognized Glen Leavor's red truck and the chase car for Kevin's balloon. Most of the others had been at Duncan's house the previous night. High above them, the colorful balloons had drifted far apart. It was difficult from this angle to tell which was in the lead.

Philip turned onto a side road to better follow his uncle's route, and then it happened without warning. Suddenly a tiny speck was falling from the basket of the red and white balloon.

It took Susan just an instant to realize that the speck was a man and the man must be Duncan Rowe.

They found his body in the center of a cornfield, after searching the lanes of knee-high stalks until they spotted him sprawled on his back staring at the cloudless sky. Rita screamed and tried to run to him, but Philip held her back. Susan, seeing there was nothing she could do here, glanced back at the road where Leavor's truck had just pulled up.

She ran back to him and said, "Duncan's dead. Let's go after that balloon."

"What for?" he asked blankly.

"Something killed him. I want to know what."

Leavor headed back onto the main road and sped toward the area where the red and white balloon was beginning to lose altitude. Kevin's Pegasus balloon had continued on course. Apparently he was unaware of what had happened. "These things need radios," Susan said.

"They use cellular phones to communicate during formal events, but this was just fooling around."

"It wasn't fooling around for Duncan," she reminded him grimly.

"I know. I didn't mean—"

"There was his wife last summer and Bruce Manchester just last week. They have to be connected."

The balloon Daisy was losing altitude at a faster rate. It just missed a stand of trees and bounced across a dirty road into a ditch. They reached it within minutes. Susan and Leavor were both out of the truck, running toward it as the red and white envelope settled down around it.

"Looks all right," Leavor announced, pushing some of the deflated fabric out of the basket. "I can't see what went wrong."

"Neither can I," Susan admitted, "but if he jumped, something made him do it."

"Here come some of the others. We'll get this onto my truck. I'm sure the police will want to examine it."

With a little help Leavor quickly loaded the basket into his truck and collected the envelope into its cylinder. Susan rode back with him and they encountered Kevin Nova on the way, flagging them down from his chase car. "What happened?" Nova asked Susan, the blood drained from his face. "I heard—"

She nodded. "Duncan is dead. He jumped or fell from his balloon. We don't know what happened."

"Just like Manchester."

"It appears so."

"Are Philip and Rita back at the house?"

"They're with his body," Leavor told him. "It's in a cornfield about a mile back along this road."

"Go on. We'll follow you."

Someone had called an ambulance and it arrived just as they did. Rita was sobbing now, with Philip trying to comfort her. A state police car had arrived on the scene and Philip asked Susan if she could drive Rita back to Duncan's house in the convertible. It was no time to explain that New Yorkers rarely drive even if they have a license, so she agreed. It was like another rental car.

Once they were under way, the blond young woman stopped crying and settled down. "Philip was very close to his uncle," she explained. "I feel very sad for him."

"Have you known Philip long?"

"Since last summer. We met in Des Moines just after I graduated from Drake. He's been wonderful to me."

"Did Duncan have any enemies? Is there anyone who would want to kill him?"

"No one. He was very popular, especially among the balloonists."

"Yet I feel that someone or something forced him to jump. Manchester's death the week before is too much of a coincidence, especially since he went up in the balloon Duncan was planning to pilot."

"You know, they used to write mysteries like this, with locked rooms and impossible crimes. They don't do it so much anymore." She began warming to the subject as Susan drove. "I've read some stories about killing somebody like this."

"In a balloon?"

"No, no, I don't remember one of those. But there was a young woman on a balcony once who fell to her death. It turned out the killer, on another balcony, used a bullwhip to yank her off and send her falling. He wrapped it around her neck and pulled."

Susan nodded. "Kevin Nova was right below Manchester's balloon, and claims to have heard a shot. It could have been the crack of a bullwhip."

"Except he wouldn't have said that if he did it. And besides, he was far away from Duncan's balloon today. Bullwhips and lassos just wouldn't have worked. If it's murder it has to be some other method."

"What other method is there?"

"Well, John Dickson Carr once had a novel where the killer introduced carbon dioxide gas into a tower room. The victim jumped from the window to avoid suffocation as the gas displaced the oxygen in the room."

"That wouldn't work in an open-air balloon basket," Susan pointed out.

"Then maybe something else made him jump. A writer named C. Daly King wrote a story about the crew of a motor-boat who jumped overboard and drowned for no reason. It turned out there were giant wolf-spiders hiding on board that came out when the boat's motor heated up."

"No wolf-spiders," Susan insisted with a firm shake of her head as she pulled into the Rowe driveway.

"Maybe a giant bird of some sort, a vulture or an eagle—"

"You read too many mysteries, Rita."

"Then you think he just jumped?"

Susan didn't answer till Rita let them into the house. Then she said, "I don't know. The answer may lie in the first death, a year ago. When we were talking last night, Leavor mentioned that Diana Rowe had left a suicide note for Duncan, and that he still had it. Do you think I could see it?"

She hesitated a moment, then said, "I suppose so. He had it framed with her picture and hung it in his den."

"He framed her suicide note?" Leavor had mentioned that too.

"He always considered it more of a love letter."

Susan followed her into the den and stood before a large color photograph of a strikingly handsome woman, her lips curled into a slight enigmatic smile. Beneath it a rectangle had been cut in the mat to show a brief handwritten note: *I'm leaving our vacant existence yet our unique grand love endures nobly.*

Susan reread the words with their seeming contradiction. She was still staring at them when Philip Rowe came in a few minutes later. "That was Diana's suicide note," he said quietly. "Now my uncle is with her."

"You think he killed himself too?"

"There's no other explanation. The state police agree."

"No other explanation," Susan agreed reluctantly.

"You'll be returning to New York now?"

"I still have a store promotion to plan. I'll have to speak with Kevin now."

It was sometime after one when Kevin Nova arrived at the house with some of the others to offer their sympathies. She got Kevin aside and asked him about taking Pegasus to New York in the fall. "I can't think about it today," he told her. "After what happened to Duncan I don't feel like ever going near a balloon again."

"What happened wasn't your fault."

"He wouldn't have been up there if I hadn't accepted his challenge to the race."

"You weren't racing Manchester last week, were you?"

"No," he admitted, but that didn't seem to make him feel any better.

Leavor had brought the downed balloon to the state police substation for examination, but they'd been unable to find anything out of the ordinary. Philip spoke to them on the phone and then came to announce that the death would probably be classified as an accident, as had Manchester's the week before. There was no evidence of suicide, and murder seemed out of the question.

"No one would have a motive for killing Duncan," Kevin Nova agreed.

No motive, no means. Susan thought about it. Was it only her past experience with crime that made her see something here that didn't really exist?

She decided to stay one more night and speak with Nova again in the morning.

Susan awoke in the morning knowing who killed Duncan Rowe and Bruce Manchester. She knew who'd killed them and how it had been done. Perhaps her subconscious mind had been working on it while she slept.

After breakfast she drove over to Duncan Rowe's home, hoping they'd all be there prior to visiting the funeral parlor. Philip and Rita were serving bacon and eggs to some of the usual crowd, and she saw Nova and Leavor at once. She

walked into the living room as if she owned the place and went right to the den.

"Susan," Rita called, "do you want some breakfast?"

"I've had it, thanks." She lifted the picture of Diana Rowe—the one with the suicide note—off the wall and walked back through the living room with it.

Philip interrupted her. "Where are you going with that?"

"To the police. It's evidence in a murder case."

After two deaths, the killer was beyond bluffing it out. He leaped from the sofa and tried to grab it from her. For an instant no one seemed to know what was going on. Finally they held him down while Philip demanded an explanation from her.

"He was Diana's lover," she said simply. "She couldn't break away from Duncan and she couldn't give up the affair, so she went up in the balloon and found another way out. Even with her suicide note she found a way to communicate with each of them. You all looked at it for a year and no one ever saw it. Perhaps you just needed a fresh set of eyes."

"Saw what?" Rita asked, staring at the note below the photograph.

"Read it: *I'm leaving our vacant existence yet our unique grand love endures nobly.* That was the message for Duncan. Now read the first letter of each word and get a quite different message: *I love you Glen.*"

Glen Leavor glared at her and said nothing. The men holding him tightened their grip.

"He felt that Duncan had driven her to suicide, and he spent a year devising the proper vengeance. He failed last week when Duncan and Manchester switched balloons at the last minute. The innocent Manchester died in place of Duncan. Yesterday Leavor was more successful."

"But *how*?" Philip demanded. "How could he have forced my uncle to jump to his death from that balloon?"

Susan was staring at Glen Leavor, whose expression of controlled anger hadn't softened. "Duncan didn't jump, he was pushed. You might say a blow from a giant boxing glove knocked him out of that basket. He was killed by an airbag—an automobile airbag."

* * *

It wasn't until Glen Leavor confessed to the police many hours later that Susan and the others learned the full story. It was Nova's report of hearing a shot just before Manchester fell that had made her think of an airbag. "It's like a shot when they go off," she explained. "The igniter squib detonates with a bang, just like a gunshot, and the airbag is inflated with nitrogen gas in something like fifty milliseconds. I'd guess it was hidden in the box behind the control panel. What I took to be a fire extinguisher attached to a bracket on the bottom of that box was really the small tank for the compressed nitrogen gas."

"But you and Leavor reached the downed balloon together," Philip said. "Why didn't you notice the deflated airbag?"

"Because Leavor painted it the same colors as the balloon's envelope. I did notice him pushing some of the deflated fabric out of the basket, but I thought it was part of the envelope. Naturally he removed the entire gadget while he was bringing the basket back in his truck. Leavor's in the auto repair business, remember. And he encouraged the race by immediately betting on Duncan to win. He probably stocks airbag kits as replacements after accidents. He no doubt inflated it with an air pump, spray-painted it to match the envelope, and then replaced it and reattached it to the pressurized tank of nitrogen gas. Getting it into that gauge box would have been easy."

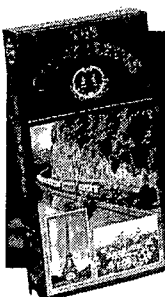
Susan's deductions had been correct so far as they went. Leavor revealed he'd added a device like a kitchen timer to the box so it would buzz after a certain number of minutes. When Manchester and Duncan Rowe lifted the lid to find the cause of the buzzing they activated the airbag. Angled slightly upward, it hit them with the force of—yes, a boxing glove. Without an automobile seat behind them they were thrown backward, over the edge of the basket to their deaths.

"I suppose they were the first victims murdered with automobile airbags," Susan told Rita as she prepared to leave the next day, but she wished somehow she could have changed that to "almost" murdered in the case of Duncan Rowe. She'd liked the man, and she would have liked having him at Mayfield's fall promotion. As it was, Kevin Nova had agreed to take part, with his balloon.

She knew every time she looked at it she'd remember Duncan's body falling through space. ●

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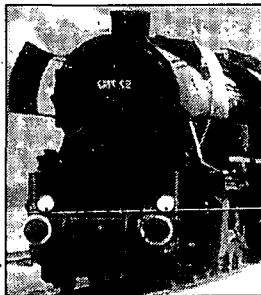
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HEIRLOOMS

by Brendan DuBois

On Tuesday my brother Sam calls me at my home office and he gets right to the point: "Are you coming to Uncle Leo's camp this weekend? You know we don't have much time to settle things before the real-estate agents start crawling around."

I look at the mess that pretends it's a desk and do my best to turn away Sam's request, but it doesn't work. "You're named in the will, just like me," he says. "Aaron, I'm not going to do this alone. It's your responsibility, too."

Responsibility. A hell of a word that's another way of saying you have to do things you'd prefer not to do.

"All right," I say, giving in, and I look at my calendar where earlier I had written "Boston?" next to the July listing and I say, "I'll be up for the weekend, but I might have to get away for some business Saturday night. Will that be okay?"

"Sure," Sam says, and after a few minutes of trading parent stories—Mother and Father are enjoying themselves in Florida and have no intention of ever coming back to New England, driving through snow, or paying another heating bill for the rest of their comfortable lives—I ask him if we will be alone up at Uncle Leo's camp.

There's a pause, long enough for me to hear one police car siren and three or four honks of taxis below me, before he answers. "Kathy will be there, and Joanie."

Brendan DuBois debuted in *EQMM's* Department of First Stories in 1986. Last year, he made the leap to longer fiction with a novel introducing amateur detective Lewis Cole. The book drew this comparison from Booklist: "Cole will remind hard-boiled hero fans of Robert B. Parker's Spenser . . . A winner on all counts: plot, action, characters, and suspense." New in the series: *Black Tide*, from Otto Penzler Books. †

My two nieces, both now approaching teenager status. "And Carol?"

Another pause, this time punctuated by the wailing of a car alarm. "We're not getting along any better, Aaron. Not at all. Um, I'd imagine that this is probably our last summer together."

Damn. Sam is a bookworm and a bit of a lunk, but he's a dear younger brother and doesn't deserve what he's been going through and what's about to happen to him. Divorce lawyers. Property settlements. Visitation rights. Ugh. Who needs it.

"Sorry to hear that, old man," I say, and we talk about scheduling and when to meet, and then I hang up the phone and look out the window at the city and wonder how in hell we all got here.

I don't brood for long, for business beckons. I leave my co-op and take the elevator downstairs, where the doorman tips his hat to me, more for my generous Christmas tips than for any inherent goodness on his part. My name on the tenancy agreement and the name that he calls me by every day—as in, "Good morning, Mr. Drury"—are fake. The demands of business and privacy, and I'm sure the doorman wouldn't mind if my real name was Ivan the Terrible so long as the Christmas bonuses continued. In this city and so many other places in this tired country, the real names that count are the ones that get passed around between quiet and firm hands: Jackson, Grant, and Franklin.

My walk is an aimless one, and then I take a cab uptown for six blocks. The driver's name on his identification is a mishmash of syllables that I find hard to pronounce, and I decide he must be from the latest killing field in the Balkans. The true sign of failed international diplomacy: The weary and troubled survivors always end up on our shores as taxicab drivers. I get off in a section of the city that's never proudly featured in television shows or movies, and I walk past crumbling cement and brick walls, their sides scarred by sharp letters from spray-paint cans. The smell is of exhaust and wet trash. I come across a bank of four phones. Two of them are working and I put in a fistful of coins and make my first and only business call of the day.

The phone rings once and is answered by a sleepy-sounding male who says, "Six-four-four-one."

"This is Tyler"—sorry, another fake name—"Can I have the seventh assignment desk, please."

"Hold on." I'm placed on hold and I listen to an all-news radio station for a moment, which I guess is better than listening to dead air. There is no such thing as a seventh assignment desk. I don't even know what the place I talk to is really called. But the phone was answered by four digits, and as part of the identification code, I add one digit to the first number and ask for that assignment desk. Silly, but it's protection, and that counts.

A woman comes on the line and the conversation is quick and to the point. "What is it, Tyler?"

"The matter in Boston," I say. "I can take care of it Saturday night, if that's convenient."

Her voice is emotionless. "Hold on." I'm flipped back to the all-news station, and then there's a commercial break and I find that the station is in Detroit. Which doesn't mean a damn thing about the real location of where I'm calling.

She comes back on. "That will be fine," she says and hangs up.

I walk away from the phones and give dollar bills to every beggar I see for two blocks, and then I take a subway downtown, still feeling pretty good despite the heat and the noise.

Odd. This weekend I'll be combining my personal and professional lives, something I thought would never happen.

First time for everything, I suppose.

On an early Friday evening I drive along a dirt road near a lake in central New Hampshire, heading for my Uncle Leo's place. The road is bumpy and choked with potholes, and branches from pine trees and birches scrape along the sides and windows of my rented car. Though it's been a few years since I've been here, I still remember the roads that must be taken and the turns that have to be made. A memory for places and directions is one of my gifts. I make a turnoff at a large pine tree that has a plain wooden sign that says NOLAN (a real name, this time) and drive for another three or four minutes before reaching Uncle Leo's camp.

In New Hampshire, cottages and homes built along a lake are known by the all-encompassing term "camp." A camp can be a tarpaper shack heated with wood or a six-bedroom mansion with a satellite dish on the boat dock, just so long as it's on lake water. Uncle Leo's place falls into the middle ranking of such homes. I park the rented Grand Am next to my brother's Volvo station wagon. There's a bumper sticker on the rear window

that says Think Globally, Act Locally, and I know it belongs to Sam, for his soon-to-be-ex-wife Carol can only think and act for herself.

The house is two stories, painted dark brown, with no shutters on the windows. Camps don't have shutters. The driveway is dirt and there's a rear porch to the house made of stained lumber. Split wood for the fireplace is piled neatly on one end of the porch, and as I step out of the car, my brother Sam comes out from the rear door of the camp. He and I are about the same height, but that's where the similarity ends. His hair is beating a retreat from his forehead, and love handles have secured a beachhead around his hips. He's wearing the obligatory college-professor-on-summer-break uniform of pale blue polo shirt and khaki shorts, and though he's smiling as he comes over to shake my hand, his eyes are somber behind his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Glad you could make it, Aaron, really," he says. "It shouldn't take that long to wrap things up, and maybe we can squeeze in some time for relaxation."

"Maybe so," I say, knowing that my business tomorrow night will take care of any relaxation. "Have you started going through Uncle Leo's stuff yet?"

He helps me with a suitcase from the rental car as we go up the rear porch. There's another locked case that will stay in the trunk as long as I'm at the camp. Business.

"No, not yet, I've been waiting for you." And then, the damndest thing. He stops and almost looks embarrassed. "You see, well . . ."

"Well what?"

He turns, as if to see if anyone can hear us. "It's the house. Sometimes it scares me, Aaron. It really does."

It's probably only because I'm the last one in, but I end up in Uncle Leo's own bedroom, since my brother and nieces have taken the other spare rooms. I toss my suitcase on the bed and hang up a garment bag in one of the two walk-in closets. The closets are set towards the east side of the bedroom, and though they look identical from the position of the doors, one is much bigger than the other. A pair of windows overlook the lake, and there is a long, low bureau between the closets, overwhelmed by a large set-in mirror. Instead of gazing at myself I wash my face in an adjoining bathroom; change into jeans and a plain

blue T-shirt, and head out to the front of the house, which overlooks Lake Milton. There's a wide screened-in porch and a tiny yard and sandy beach, from where a large dock juts out to the lake. There are lakes in New Hampshire that have camps and cottages lining the shore only fifty feet apart, and on weekends the waves from the motorboat wakes are so high you'd swear you were on the ocean.

But Uncle Leo had the luck or foresight to build his place on Lake Milton, where most of the surrounding land is in a preserve owned by the local chapter of the Nature Conservancy, which means no development (or land rape, depending on your background), mostly peaceful days, and even quieter nights. I go outside, past some old wicker furniture on the scraggly lawn, and join my brother Sam out on the dock. We sit in rusty, folding lawn chairs and look out onto the cold blue waters. Flanking the sides of the dock are moored and covered shapes that hide a powerboat and a sailboat, and something tugs at me a bit as I look at the old wooden sailboat. Years ago, before I left school and joined the Marines, I learned to sail on this lake using this very sailboat. Now it's resting at dockside, something else to be added up in the tallies of property to be sold as part of the estate, and I know I'll never use that boat again. Oh, I'm sure I could convince Sam to let me have it as the estate is divvied up, but I know it won't happen. A sailboat is hardly something one can keep in the dry streets of the city.

The sun is quite bright, and except for what's happening a few feet away, the day is relatively quiet. At the end of the dock my two nieces—Kathy and Joanie—are lying on beach towels and listening to a radio, wearing skimpy black bathing suits; they give half-bored waves to their dear old uncle as I sit down. Not much of a greeting, but it's what I expect; you can't expect blood relations to translate into an instant or constant friendship. They're getting older, and due to my own circumstances, I've not spent much time with them.

I join Sam in drinking a bottle of Heineken and he says, "We're up here for a week and I hope it's not the last week, but I can't see any way around it. I'm going to miss this place, you know."

The beer tastes just fine on this hot July Friday and I say, "You're going to miss what? Just a couple of minutes ago you were telling me that the place scares you, Sam."

He gives me a rueful grin. "Doesn't mean it makes sense, and I know it. Oh, it's not the house that scares me, I guess. It's just Uncle Leo's possessions and junk in there. It's spooky. Once it's cleared out, it'll be fine. I just wish I had the bucks to keep it up."

I take another swallow from the beer. "From what you tell me, I think you're going to need as much money as you can get over these next few months, as your lovely wife starts stripping you to the bone. Keeping this place won't help you."

"I know that, but it still stinks. I have some good memories here, and I hate the thought of having strangers move in."

"I can see your point," I say, looking out to the middle of the lake. Only two speedboats and a solitary sailboat mar the waters. "I've got some good memories, too, Sam."

His next sentence is a careful one, as if he's practiced it many times before. "Ever think of buying my share, keep this place in the family?"

Oh, my. Just what I need in my business. Property owner and a paper trail.

"Good suggestion, Sam, but it won't work," I say. "I'm tapped out. The market's been brutal this spring. Sorry." And from my tone of voice, I give him the message to drop the subject, which as a good younger brother, he does.

"Hmmm," he eventually says. "Funny thing about the place, though, something that Uncle Leo told me before he died."

"What's that?"

Sam looks over at me, the troubled look still there in his eyes. "Even though it was left to you and me, he asked me—hell, he begged me, to burn it down. Outright. Leave everything inside and burn it to the ground."

"Did he say why?"

"Nope. Just begged me. And you remember Uncle Leo. He wasn't one to beg, but he wanted me to torch this place without even going inside."

Something begins to gnaw at the base of my skull, with tiny and dull teeth. "Hell of a last request."

"Tell me about it."

Later, dinner is served in the big kitchen, where my brother tries his hand at whipping up a pot of spaghetti. The sauce is lukewarm and the spaghetti's not quite cooked all the way, for it lumps together in long strands. Kathy and Joanie give each

other smug, eye-rolling glances as dear old Dad bumbles through making dinner. Kathy—I think—is about thirteen and Joanie is a year younger, and except for the color of their long hair—Kathy's is blond while Joanie's is brown—they could be twins. Both have on expensive-looking jeans and white sweatshirts, and they talk a bit among themselves about boys and trips and shopping as Sam and I do the dishes. I feel as if Sam and I are intruders on their own special weekend.

The kitchen is huge, with a gas-fired stove and big grill, and pots and pans hanging from rough-hewn beams overhead. The dishes only take a couple of minutes and the girls make motions of yawning and ask to go to bed. When they leave I look over at Sam and he shrugs.

"They've got some new hand-held computer game that they've been dying to get to all day, but I told them only after dinner." He shrugs again. "It seems wrong, somehow, to be up here and play with a computer. It's a lake, it's the north country, it's summer—they should be outside. You can play with a computer any old day of the week."

I wipe my hands dry with a towel. "How are they handling what's going on between you and Carol?"

He makes a sharp sound that under better circumstances could have been called a laugh. "I think they see it as a joke, entertainment. Like they're in the middle of one of their soap operas and they're the guest stars and they can hardly wait to see what the next scene is going to be." He looks up at me as if he's about to cry. "God help me, it hurts, Aaron, it really does."

With after-dinner beers firmly in hand, we go to the big living room, which is more of a den or sportsman's retreat than anything else. Hanging on the wood-paneled walls are mounted heads from animals Uncle Leo shot in his many years of the hunt. I try to ignore the well-stocked gun rack in one corner as I join Sam in looking at the trophies. Moose, deer, antelope, tiger, bighorn sheep, bear (both black and polar), and a couple of horned animals that look unfamiliar. They must have come from Asia or Africa. There's a stone fireplace with cold ashes, big enough to cook an ox, on the far side of the room, and a wooden desk with a high leather chair. Old black-and-white photographs line the walls not covered by trophy heads, and at the rear of the desk is a bookshelf jammed with books.

I wander over to the bookshelves. "Anything interesting in here?"

"Define interesting," he said. "There are a lot of bound issues of magazines, everything from *Field & Stream* to *The American Rifleman*. Books by guys I never heard about, writing about their great adventures in blowing away some harmless creature. Other adventure stuff. A little old fiction. Nothing worth keeping at my house, Aaron, so you're welcome to it. Some kind of heirlooms, nothing worth retiring for."

I look over at him. "Grumpy because he doesn't have your books here?"

That seems to strike something in him and he says, "Why would I care? He'd just be joining ninety-nine point nine percent of the reading public in the Northeast."

Poor Sam. Besides teaching history at a small college in this state, he's also tried his hand at writing books, and has had two of them printed. One, which was published by a regional press in New England, was about the first royal governor of New Hampshire, back when it was a colony of Great Britain. That book quickly sank from sight. His second was just a bit more successful, having been published by a middle-sized house in New York City. It was a new look at Joseph Kennedy, the oldest son of the Kennedy clan who, if he hadn't died in World War II, would have been the first Kennedy out of the gate into politics after the war was over, instead of his younger brother Jack. Through grinding work—and some good luck finding several overlooked Army Air Force documents and a diary written by one of Joe Kennedy's friends—Sam's book had revealed a new aspect of the first martyred Kennedy, and it had done respectably well. It had even garnered a positive, five-paragraph review in *The New York Times*, which made Sam burble with glee for about a month or two. There was even talk about a paperback deal, but eventually that fell through and Sam stopped being gleeful and became morose, wondering where his next book would come from.

I confess—though never to my brother—that both autographed books gather dust on a bookshelf at home, unread. Too many footnotes, I guess. He's told me these past couple of months that he's been casting about for an idea for his third book, but that nothing has come to him. "It's like waiting at a singles bar, hoping something interesting will come along and

trying not to panic when the clock gets to closing time," Sam told me once, and I think that's a fairly good analogy, though I don't know when Sam has ever been in a singles bar in his life.

Sam wanders over to the near wall and takes down a photograph and then sits down in the big leather chair. "Look here, bro, here's our uncle, the man who's forced us to give up a summer weekend to paw through his trash."

From the way he's speaking and the way the words are being slurred out, I guess that Sam had a jump start on the afternoon's drinking. I sit on the edge of the big wooden desk and look down at the black-and-white framed print. In it Uncle Leo is smiling broadly, his white teeth straight and even, his gray handlebar moustache wide and firm. His cap is in his hand, held up as if in triumph, and what little hair he has on the sides of his balding head is shaved to crewcut level. The other hand holds a rifle by its barrel, and one foot is on the back of a dead animal lying crumpled in tall grass. It looks like a water buffalo.

"Looks almost like Papa Hemingway," I say, and Sam laughs.

"No, Aaron, I think he looks like you."

"Sorry. No moustache and I have more hair than you."

He turns in the chair. "No, look at the eyes, will you? That's how he looks like you. It's in the eyes."

I decide not to reply, for something about what Sam has said has suddenly made me feel uncomfortable. I take the photo from his hands and say, "I wonder why Mom disliked him so much. She should be here with us, cleaning out her brother's stuff."

"Look around you, bro," Sam says. "Mom's been a vegetarian for how many years now? And she belongs to all those protest groups that enjoy getting arrested each weekend. Hell, this place is probably a museum to her worst nightmares. She once told me that she often wondered if she and Uncle Leo had the same father, that's how different they were. You name it, and they were on opposite ends. Hell, I think Uncle Leo was still against fluoridating water."

"Maybe so," I say, "but at least he lived to see the Berlin Wall come down."

Sam smiles and waves a hand. "Don't you believe it. I talked to him about that and he said it was all a plot, all a secret plan, that the godless commies were just sucking us in."

"Well, he had principles, weird as they were."

Sam cocks his head. "In some way, you're like Mother, aren't you?"

"In what way?"

"It never seemed like you two got along. Hell, I don't think I ever saw the two of you exchange more than a sentence or two anytime you were together."

"Well, he did write a couple of letters, but you're right. Something just didn't click. I never could figure it out."

"Something he said?"

I try not to look at him. "Maybe something he did. I don't know. We just never hit it off."

"Yeah, me too, I guess. Being around him . . . well, it was almost scary. His drinking. All those guns. His mouth. You always thought he was about one minute away from hitting someone."

I leave the framed photo on the desk, and with beer in hand I look at the other photos. Most of them are of his hunting exploits, but there are a couple that show him wearing heavy winter gear, standing in snow or on a muddy path. Korea. Uncle Leo had made the long march back from the Frozen Chosin, and in the only letter he wrote to me when I was in the service, he told me how proud he was that I had also chosen the Marine Corps.

I never wrote him back, which probably explains why I never received a second or third letter while I was overseas.

"One thing I wonder, though," Sam calls out from behind the dead man's desk.

"What's that?" I ask.

"His work. I never quite knew what he did for work."

I remember asking that same question as a kid. All I know is that Uncle Leo said he knocked around the oil lands of Louisiana and Texas and then made a fortune in the early 1960s and decided to live back in his home state and grow old and do exactly what he damned well pleased.

"Don't you remember the oil wildcatter stories?" I say. "That's what I recall, that he made his bucks in the oil industry."

Sam swivels the chair a bit, making an irritating squeaking noise. "That's what I thought, too," he says slowly, "but there's nothing in his assets that supports that, Aaron. No stocks, bonds, no paper at all. Hell, I've gone through all of his papers here and at his lawyer's office. Nothing, except for some invest-

ment accounts that kept him going, and which the old duffer left to that damn nature group."

"He left us the house."

He leans back in the chair, tosses his feet on the empty desk. "Yeah, but I wish the son of a bitch had left us something useful."

Sam yawns and says, "Time for me to go to bed."

"Good idea."

He gets up and comes over and takes my empty beer bottle away and says, "Why don't you go outside for a moment, take a breath of fresh air before turning in."

I pat him on the shoulder. "Another good idea. I'll do that, right after I look over some of these books. Some of them might come back with me to New York."

Sam weaves slightly as he leaves and I hear the *clump-clump* of him going upstairs. I turn, and in a matter of seconds I'm standing before the gun rack in the corner. I just breathe and smell and there's the old odor of metal, gunpowder, and oil. There are five rifles there, hanging from a wooden gun rack and supported by green velvet, and I let my fingers trace these treasures, identifying all of them as I look at them. I dare not lift them from the rack, for I don't want Sam or his nieces seeing my interest, but I do know that these guns will very soon belong to me.

Ruger .35 Whelan. Winchester Model 70, .270 caliber. Browning 7mm BAR. Winchester Model 70, .30-06. Another Winchester, this one a lever-action .30-30 carbine. All high-powered rifles with mounted scopes, lean and hard with their polished wood and metal, and I imagine what it must be like to be in this room on a cold winter night with the firelight reflecting and glowing off these marvelous weapons. I touch the guns and almost feel my legs tremble at the pleasure of seeing them all there before me.

Under the gun rack is a simple wooden drawer. I open the drawer and nestled there are boxes of ammunition made by Winchester and Remington, all in different calibers: .30-30, .30-06, .308, 7mm, .270, and .35. I touch the boxes and almost feel the trembling of the power in there, locked up in tiny brass cylinders, little granules of powder that can take a stationary piece of lead and in less than a second send it hurtling thousands of feet away.

Such power. Such strength and beauty. And soon to be all mine.

I close the drawer and walk out of the room.

Outside, I stand on the dock listening and watching, knowing that my younger brother had more in mind than me getting a breath of fresh air. The night air is still and a sickle-fresh moon is rising off to the east, casting its furrowed light across the waters of the lake. A few lights from the other cottages glow steadily on the far shores. No boats are moving out on the waters, and the stars—so far away from the incessant glow of the city lights—are bright indeed. I look up and remember the constellations I learned back in the Marines when moving quietly at night could determine whether you'd live to see a sunrise. I stand on the dock and listen to the faint *slap-slap* of water on the pilings of the dock, and the *squeak-squeak* of the moored sailboat and powerboat as they rub against the wood. Some old memories come back to me, of family outings here, the time I learned to sail a boat for the first time and the first time I kissed a girl—a young neighbor from one of the other camps—and I know what my brother has done. He is trying to seduce me, trying to make me change my mind about this place, and I know I cannot let him succeed.

Then comes a long, low sound, a mournful noise that makes the hairs on the back of my neck tremble and a little knot of fear twist inside of me. The low sound is answered by another, and then the sounds become a yodeling that resembles deranged laughter, and I stand still, not wanting to disturb the moment, as the pair of loons out on the lake call to each other. Loons. I had forgotten about them, but listening to their million-year-old call, something deep within me that has been asleep for years is now awake, and I smell the night air and listen to the loons cry again, and before I leave and go inside to sleep, I curse my brother.

I am so tired that not even sleeping in a dead man's bed disturbs me, and, hungry after my brother's dinner of last night, I make a big Saturday morning breakfast for everyone: ham and cheese omelets. Through my cooking I manage to make my niece Joanie smile, which I gather is a bit of a victory. Her older sister Kathy, however, is a bigger challenge, and I leave that for another day.

With breakfast done, the girls go out on the dock for sunning and swimming, and Sam and I get to work.

Sam being Sam, he's already devised a system for what we have to do that day. He has rolls of adhesive day-glo dots in different colors. Any possession I want is tagged by a green dot. Anything Sam wants is tagged by a blue dot. Red means yard sale, white means charity, and yellow means the town dump. We begin in the cellar and right away I know that it's not going to be a difficult job.

"Look at this, will you," Sam breathes, standing next to me. It's a full cellar with concrete floor, and save for a few cardboard boxes and a wooden closet, the only thing there is the oil furnace system. Even the concrete floor has been swept clean.

"Seems like our cranky old uncle did his cleaning before he passed on," I say. "Damn considerate of him."

"Considerate?" Sam asks. "Doesn't sound like our uncle."

"True," I say, smiling in reply, and we walk over and start, finishing in less than a half-hour. Old-fashioned camping gear, years out of date, is tagged red, and some expired freeze-dried food is tagged yellow. Sam decides to take a pair of old binoculars, and I do the same for a large compass. In the closet are some musty clothes and we go through those rather quickly, except that I stop for a moment, feeling a red-and-black-checked hunting jacket made with heavy wool.

"Uncle Leo's favorite hunting jacket," I say.

Sam nods. "Yep. Remember seeing that jacket lots of times, every fall." Then he gives me a quizzical look. "He took you hunting a couple of times, didn't he?"

It comes back to me then, that cold November day, up north beyond the White Mountains. For some reason, the invitation came by phone to my parents, and for another reason, I was bundled up and brought here. I spent a weekend practicing with one of Uncle Leo's rifles—probably the .30-06—and early one Monday morning, before the sun even rose, I was out in the woods shivering and wearing borrowed clothes, waiting with a trembling and tension that I never knew could exist. Everything seemed sharper that day—the mountains and the trees with their falling leaves, the smell of woodsmoke, the taste of coffee in my mouth, and the weight and feel of that loaded weapon in my hand. Then, like a gray ghost, the buck came out at the edge of a clearing, and without any debate, any thought, any

hesitation, I brought the rifle up and sent a slug into its side, blowing out its heart.

And then Uncle Leo joined me, standing next to me, nodding and grinning, and he looked into my eyes and nodded again, as if happy with what he saw there. He bent down and touched the steaming corpse of the deer and gently daubed my face with the deer's blood and said, "By God, you are my nephew. You are family." And my legs were trembling with joy and pleasure.

I look over at Sam and swallow and say, "Give me a yellow sticker, will you?"

By later that afternoon Sam and I have finished, though my real job has yet to begin. I need to leave in a few hours for my business trip to Boston, but most of the house is done. Sam will keep all the furnishings and kitchen items, which he will no doubt need in the next several months as Carol busily strips him clean, and I agree to take most of the books and the weapons. Other stuff is divvied up between the dump and the local Salvation Army. Sam makes a couple of comments at the sparse nature of Uncle Leo's possessions, and I keep my mouth shut. Sam has a mournful expression on his face, looking at his new possessions, knowing they were about to go with his new life, and in a tiny way I'm glad of that, for it keeps him too busy to ask me what I intend to do with all of those rifles.

He stands in the kitchen, jingling his car keys, and says, "You're welcome to come with us, you know. We're going up to Laconia for a bite to eat and a movie, and I'm sure the girls would love to have you come along."

I motion with my hand. "No need to lie, little brother. Your daughters see me about one step above a stranger, and I think you guys will have enough fun on your own. Besides, I've got to do some business tonight, meet up with a new client."

He smiles. "All right. We'll leave the front door open for you, whenever you come back."

I go outside with him and Kathy and Joanie scramble by, fighting over who gets to sit in the front seat, and as usual, age wins out and Kathy clambers into the front. Joanie gets into the rear and gives me a secret wave and smile, and I return the favor, wondering why I'm smiling so much at her. I walk around to the driver's side and Sam rolls down the window and says, "Some job, being an investment counselor like that. Having to

go meet clients on a weekend. It must be strange."

Having no idea what an investment counselor does, I just nod and wave at the not-so-happy family as they back out of the dirt driveway.

Then I go back into the house and get to work.

I stand in the center of the cellar. My brother Sam can be wrapped up in his writings, in his books, and in the nature of history so much that he could probably wear the same pair of socks six days running without noticing anything strange. But as slow as he can be, occasionally he lurches into the truth, and he was close to it a couple of times today when he noticed that the house was clean, way too clean. I agreed from the outset, but not wanting to venture into such dangerous territory, I kept my mouth shut.

Now I have the house to myself. I check my watch. Two hours before I have to leave for Boston. Let's see what we can do in one hundred and twenty minutes.

"You've got secrets here, Uncle Leo," I announce to his ghost. "And I'm going to find them."

Some accusation. I'm glad I'm not looking in the mirror. So instead I start in the cellar and decide to do a full toss of the house. Our cleaning this day has revealed no secrets, and it's in the nature of the beast to hide secrets, especially in its den. And Uncle Leo is no different.

Twenty minutes and my first discovery. Hidden behind a panel for the house's electrical system in the basement is a packet of letters written in the mid-1960s. All are from a woman named Liddy, whom Uncle Leo apparently met while on a trip to Washington State. In one photo, she is wearing a bikini. The photo is black-and-white and the woman looks about fifteen pounds too heavy for the bikini. I put the letters back after giving them a quick read. The last one in the pile is fairly plaintive, asking my uncle why he never wrote her back.

I guess she didn't get to know him that well.

After another thirty minutes of looking behind, between, and under places, I make my second discovery of the day, this time, in my uncle's den. On the top shelf of his bookcase is a volume titled *Geographical Relationships in the World*

which is at least a half-foot thick and was written in England in 1898. The inside of the book has been hollowed out and inside are a few reels of old-style, 8mm movie reels. I undo one of the reels and hold it up to the light and make out an unclothed couple on a bed, doing what most unclothed couples in beds usually do. The rest of the tapes are all the same subject matter, and I return them to the book, not feeling surprised one bit by what I've found.

I check my watch. About forty-five minutes left. I go upstairs.

And fifteen minutes later, in the attic, I make the third discovery, hidden behind a roll of insulation: a two-inch-thick band of one-hundred-dollar bills. I flip through the bills and decide that they really don't belong in the attic; somehow, I'll make sure they end up in Sam's pocket. The attic is dusty and breathing is hard. I go back to the den and I feel that something is out of place. Something in this room has called me back. I look around at the photos and books and empty fireplace. I had taken a flashlight and looked up the chimney, and had found nothing, and none of the photos or mounted animal heads had hidden a wall safe or anything else equally glamorous.

But I'm missing something. Of that I'm sure. I check the watch. About fifteen minutes before I have to leave, twenty if I decide to gamble. I wander around the room, touching objects again, looking over the near-empty desk sitting in one corner.

And then I look at the weapons. I go over, let my fingers trace about them one more time, identify them lovingly, with a sense of wanting in my voice. Ruger .35 Whelan. Winchester .270. Browning 7mm. Winchester .30-06. And the other Winchester, the .30-30. All gleaming as if new, just waiting for trained and eager hands to lift them up and slide in the shiny bright cartridges, each holding back power, each holding back promise, each—

Ammunition.

I open the drawer again, look at the boxes of cartridges nestled there. All different calibers, nestled in their cardboard homes: .30-30, .30-06, .308, 7mm, .270, and .35.

I look up again at the rifles, look back at the ammunition.

There's a box of .308 cartridges.

But no .308 rifle.

And Uncle Leo would not be one either to buy or store useless ammunition.

I close the drawer, check my watch. Ten minutes left, maybe fifteen if I want to stretch it.

Leave it for tomorrow, a voice says.

But I'm close.

Somewhere in this house, a .308 rifle is hidden. And for what reason? And where? I look around the den, at Uncle Leo's favorite room in the house, and I go upstairs, to another important room.

And in the bedroom I sit on the cold and empty bed and wait. And think.

And I decide I don't like the closets. I get up and go to the closet to the right, past the hangers and clothes and smell of mothballs, and the closet is deep, allowing space back there for shoes and old sneakers and even a couple of crumpled sweaters.

But the other closet, the one nearest to the wall, that one is about half the size of its brother.

It doesn't make sense.

I remove the clothes from the smaller closet and dump them on the bed and check the watch again. Five minutes, and that's really pushing it, really getting myself into some serious trouble, but something else is pushing me as I take a small black flashlight from my travel bag and put it in my mouth and examine the closet, which looks exactly like a closet. The floor of this closet—unlike the other—is spotlessly clean, save for a nail lying near one wall. I go to the far wall and tap on it, and it sounds like any other wall. It's made of dull yellow plaster. I press against it and there's a bit of movement, and I notice lines in the newly exposed dust. This wall has been moved before. I try not to think of the watch as I examine the plaster, moving my fingers. Looking at everything in the sharp glare of the flashlight, I spot a tiny hole halfway down, a couple of inches away from the adjacent wall.

I shine the light in the hole, which is about one-third the size of a dime. Nothing is visible in the glare of the light. I push against the wall again, step back, and even though I know I'm running right up against the time, I can't help but smile.

"Good one, Uncle Leo," I say out loud in admiration. "Real good."

I bend down and scoop up the nail and jam it into the hole, and there's a satisfying *click* as a lock is released and I push against the wall and it swings inward quite easily. There is a musty smell and I shine the flashlight and see a cluttered room with shelves and cardboard boxes and a long object in a leather pouch leaning against the wall. The missing .308, no doubt.

I think about walking quickly forward, but two things stop me: one is the time, and the other is something the flashlight has caught near the floor, and only because of the dust I have raised.

A length of fishline, running across the floor at about shin height. A little surprise, I'm sure, for unannounced visitors to this little room.

"Later," I say, and I close the false wall and move everything back into the closet, and race like hell downstairs to my car.

Three hours later, calm and a bit more comfortable, I'm waiting in the back of a rental van on the narrow streets of the North End in Boston. Before going to visit my brother and my nieces I spent a couple of days in Boston and the area towns, getting ready for this night's work. The van is rented under yet another name—complete with its own credit card—and its license plates have been lifted from a car in a shopping mall in Saugus. The plates are handicapped, allowing me to spend some time in this spot, and even though I'm working, I'm feeling a bit guilty about taking this spot from someone who really might need it.

I've strung up a blackout curtain between the van's rear and front seat, and the windows back here are tinted. I'm sitting in a rather comfortable chair, keeping an eye on things through a Bushnell spotting scope. At the rear of the van is the narrow street with its brick buildings in Boston's North End, and a small restaurant called Isola's. I check my watch. Almost eleven P.M. Almost time. In my lap is a looseleaf binder filled with 8x10 black-and-white photos, and there's a small video unit on the floor of the van playing a tape in a continuous loop. There's a man on the tape, walking in a long wool coat, smiling and laughing, and in the binder there are twenty-

four photos of the same man. I don't know his name, and I don't know his job. I just know what he looks like. Beside the video unit is the locked box that was in the rear of my rental car, and the long box has been unlocked, revealing the foam-filled center.

I look down at the video screen. The man walks down the street, laughing, talking to two companions. His hair is nicely trimmed, and his eyes are twinkling, and his face looks pink and clean-shaven. Then there's a blur of static and he returns again, walking. Living forever on a half-inch loop of magnetic tape. Some people don't even get that.

I look away from the screen, back to the spotting scope. Activity on the street. I move the spotting scope to one side and reach down to the open box and pick up my .223 Ruger Model 77. One of the van's rear windows is slightly open and I rest the end of the barrel and its silencer on the edge of the window frame. In the scope the man I can see with my eyes closed is now moving along on the sidewalk, though this time he is in short sleeves and comfortable slacks. But his smile and gait and confidence are all there, and he's moving between two of his friends, talking with his hands, looking ahead to the soft orange lights of Isola's, his head centered right in the middle of the rifle's scope.

I begin my breathing exercises, the ones I learned while in the Corps, and I feel the muscles in my fingers and arms and back settle right down. I begin squeezing with the index finger of my right hand.

Smiles, laughter, confident strolls.

And then a man's head turns pink and red.

Then it's automatic time. The rifle goes down and I pass through the curtain and start up the van. In one minute, I'm out on the street. Five minutes later I'm on an expressway exit, and twenty-five minutes later, complete with new license plates, I'm heading north, looking for a place to dump the van. Within an hour I'm back in my rental car, heading to New Hampshire, thinking, one tap to the forehead and I'm ten thousand dollars richer.

Not bad at all.

* * *

Driving back down the road to the camp, I see Sam's Volvo is back and that most of the lights are off in the house. Stepping up to the rear porch, I look into the lit kitchen and see something that makes me stop. Kathy and Joanie are at the counter, with open bottles of beer before them, and some magazines are spread out on the counter. Both girls are wearing dark blue bathrobes, and the robes are open at the top, and it looks as if my nieces are examining each other with their tiny hands. I try to make extra noise as I go in but it doesn't seem to make a difference. The robes remain open and they look over and slowly close them as I walk farther into the kitchen.

Kathy, the older one, says, "Do you want a beer, Uncle Aaron?"

"No, I don't," I say, looking at them both. "Where's your dad?"

"Upstairs, sleeping," Kathy continues. Joanie looks away, as if she's embarrassed.

Knowing I won't sleep much without the answer, I ask, "What are you two doing down here?"

The older sister shrugs, points to the magazines. Women's fashion magazines, with glossy photos and even glossier models. "Looking at the pictures, comparing what we've got, what we might get as we get older."

A beer suddenly sounds very attractive. "Why?"

This time, Joanie answers. "Mother says when we're eighteen, if we don't like what we look like, then she'll give us a visit to a plastic surgeon for our birthday."

Kathy grins at me. "What do you think about that, Uncle Aaron?"

I brush past them on my way upstairs. "I think you should stay away from your mother and spend more time with your father."

Upstairs, in the dead man's bed, I start to doze off, the keening and yelping of the loons making me feel even more drowsy. The closet will have to wait until tomorrow, for I'm tired and what's in there is nothing that should be examined with sleepy eyes and thick fingers. As I drift off to sleep, I feel the touch of fingers on my face and the stickiness of warm blood, and the proud voice: *By God, you are my nephew. You are family.*

I cook another breakfast and the girls are quiet and I know they are wondering—with the brightness of the day and the clarity following last night's beers—whether I'll mention anything about the bizarre pre-op scene I had caught in the kitchen just a handful of hours ago. I smile and look serious at the same time and decide to make them sweat for a change. The eggs are scrambled, with toast and bacon and sausage, and Sam and I take our second cups of coffee out to the dock and drink and wait for the sun to come through the clouds. It's a cool, foggy morning but the weatherman is promising a break later on.

We're sitting on the old chairs and the girls have gone for a walk in the woods—hoping, I'm sure, that if they're not around, I'll be more inclined to forget what I saw last night. I decide to toss a little surprise Sam's way, and I say, "If you don't mind, I'm going to stay up here for another day or two."

I like the look on his face. "Really? I'd like that, Aaron, I really would. Why did you change your mind?"

Oh well, another lie. "I'm beginning to relax up here, and I'm enjoying it. The office can wait for a few days. You know, you should take the girls sailing once it clears off. I'll even help you set the sails up."

"How about you?"

I give him a pleasant shrug. "I'll just relax and enjoy the day. Maybe go into town and get the Sunday papers."

Sam says, "How did your business trip go last night?"

I wink at him. "It was a blast."

So. I stand on the end of the dock and the sailboat departs with three members of my family, heading out to the waters of the lake. I give them a cheerful wave and stroll back to the house, not moving quickly, just in case someone's looking and asks dear old Dad why old dear Uncle is running into the house. Inside I keep up the fakery and stroll upstairs and then I'm back in the master bedroom, flashlight again in hand, and, half-wondering if yesterday was an illusion, I empty out the closet and get to work with the nail, and the false wall swings open once again.

I ignore the jumbled possessions in there and squat down on the floor, looking carefully at the fishline stretched across

the entryway. One end is tied to an eyehook, set behind a lip of wood, and the line stretches across the floor, goes up, and then disappears into the ceiling. I go back to my overnight bag and take out my Swiss Army knife, and hunker back in the closet. Tripwire, no doubt, but knowing how Uncle Leo's mind worked, it might be something just the opposite. After opening up the tiny pair of scissors in the knife, I stretch out flat against the wall and snip the fishline free, holding my breath all the while.

Nothing happens. Thank you, Uncle Leo.

I trace the fishline, and using a chair from another room, I get up and remove a ceiling tile. I let out a low whistle as I admire Uncle Leo's handiwork. Hidden up there and secured by ropes and brackets is a double-barreled, sawed-off shotgun, with both hammers pulled back and the fishing line placed so that a good tug—like from a foot or leg against the wire—would pull the triggers and send two loads of buckshot into a visitor's head or chest. Working carefully, I undo the line from the triggers and then—breaking off a piece of ceiling tile—I block the hammers so that they can't do what they're designed to do.

Then I step down from the chair and wipe my moist forehead. "What's the big secret, Uncle Leo?" I ask aloud. "What's worth killing someone over?"

I move the chair out and get to work. I go directly to the zippered case and undo the dusty leather, revealing the .308 bolt-action Remington with a 7x mounted scope. I take the rifle out, examining it, not quite sure why Uncle Leo had been hiding it in this room. I leave it out and then look about me. There are shelves and a work area, and they are covered with papers, files, and boxes. In the center of a shelf is a model of some buildings, made into a city square. I pick the model up. It's professionally made, with the buildings identified down to the windows. There are streets made of plastic, and miniature trees, and model cars cemented to the roadway, and a highway overpass at one end. There are even people standing in the park and on the streets, people the size of the first joint of my little finger.

I blow the dust off, revealing that the streets are named. There are three main thoroughfares, and their names are illustrated in neat white paint: Elm Street, Main Street, and

Commerce Street. I tilt the model, wondering why those names sound familiar, and I see that one of the buildings also has a name inscribed on it:

Texas School Book Depository.

An hour or so has passed, and I'm sitting on the floor of the dusty little room, having gone through most of the files, photos, and papers. There's no filing system, no sense of place, no order. It's just a jumble of objects. There's an airline ticket stub, from New Orleans to Dallas, dated November 20, 1963. All types of photos of Dealey Plaza. A leaflet marked "Fair Play for Cuba," with a rubber stamp at the bottom that says "L. H. Oswald." Copies of magazines from that week in November: *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Look*, and *Life*. A quiet journal of about eight or nine pages, outlining the events of that fall, and how it came to be that he went on a trip to Texas. And a closeup picture of my uncle that looks as if it was a timer shot or a self-portrait. In the picture is my uncle, impossibly young, standing on a small rolling patch of ground that would forever be known as the Grassy Knoll.

And he's smiling.

I hear voices from below, and the thumping noise of a boat going into the dock, and I stretch and stand up and replace the rifle in its bag, stock first. About an inch or so from the bottom, it strikes something. I pull the rifle out and try to put it back in again, but something's blocking the way. I reach to the bottom of the bag, gingerly feeling around, and fasten onto a scrap of plastic. I pull the plastic out, hearing the jangling sound, almost like coins striking one another. I hold the plastic up to the light: It's a small sandwich bag.

Inside the bag are three spent cartridge shells, their brass casings rubbing against each other.

I put the rifle back into the bag, toss the casings in after it, and then leave the secret room, closing the door behind me.

Later that night, after the girls have gone to bed—and Joanie has surprised me by giving me a quick peck on the cheek—I join Sam out on the dock, both of us drinking Jameson's and lake water. There are no boats and the only lights on the water come from the stars and the rising moon to the east.

We talk idly about politics and the state of the state, and whether that damn greenhouse effect is for real or just another hyped-up story from the environmentalists. It's a comfortable time and I smile inwardly, thinking about the surprise that I'm about to spring upon my brother, he who so desperately wants the idea for another book.

Sam looks up and says, "Shooting star," and of course I'm too late in looking up and Sam turns to me and says, "You've got to wonder sometimes why Uncle Leo never married. Hell, I don't even know if the guy ever had a steady woman, you know?"

Knowing what's hidden in the bedroom, I know why Uncle Leo would never let anybody in his life, someone to clean and poke and pry and uncover his deepest secret. But instead I say, "That's just the kind of guy he was, I guess."

Then Sam says something strange. "Somebody like you, you mean."

The glass feels heavy in my hand. "What?"

"You heard me," and he shifts in his seat. "You're a lot like him. Quiet. Single. Secretive. Traveling to places and coming back at odd times. Hell, if it weren't for the fact that it was impossible, I'd guess that the old bastard might have been your father."

This is getting too uncomfortable and too close to the truth, so I decide it's time to let Sam in on my little secret.

"Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"About the house."

"What about it?" he asks.

I raise my drink to him. "I've decided to buy it."

And as Sam talks excitedly about keeping this lakefront house in the family, I'm thinking of secrets, and of a wall safe back at my place in the city. Hidden way in the back is a letter from Uncle Leo that has always puzzled me, a letter that I received shortly before I was to be discharged from the Marines. In it he wrote, "I understand that you've done good work in the Corps, and I have no doubt your good work will continue."

At the time I had no idea what he was talking about, until the day I was picked up near my base by a couple of polite

and large men in suits who took me to a hotel room and made me a generous offer, and then flew me to El Salvador, where I began my new—but similar—line of work. Even then, I couldn't believe it, what that letter meant, until my search today.

Heirlooms. And the touch of blood on my cheeks.

So we talk some more, and Sam is still excited, and I outline the bare bones of what I see will occur. I will buy his share and leave it open for him to use, whenever and however, so long as they leave the master bedroom alone. That room is mine. Sam quickly agrees, and I make a note to add a codicil to my will, to let Sam into the secret I'm going to allow Uncle Leo to keep, even though he is dead. In my codicil I will give Sam instructions on how to find the secret closet, but only after my death. That will make a wonderful book for him, whenever it happens, but that's something I will only allow after I'm gone. To let Sam know now would raise such a white-hot storm of publicity and attention that I could not survive, not even for a week.

Sam will probably curse me and praise me at the same time—if and when I predecease him—but sorry, old man, that's the way it's going to be. I like who I am and what I do, and I don't intend to let anything get in the way.

After a couple of more drinks Sam says, "So what made you decide to buy the place, Aaron? You were right against it just a couple of days ago."

What to say? I pretend to drink and look out at the dark waters of the lake and the shimmering light of the moon on the waters, and I see the whirling forms of bats out there, weaving about, catching insects and feasting only yards away from Sam and me. Back at the house the secret room is shut and secured, and my nieces are probably asleep, and I have a sense of my uncle about here, brooding and thinking. What to say? That his wonderful place was no doubt purchased through blood money, because of the crime of the century? And that this makes me feel proud, that my uncle could have pulled it off?

I look over at Sam and say, "Guilt, I suppose."

That makes him laugh. "Guilt? I never thought guilt was something you ever felt, Aaron. But why that?"

I shrug. "Something that came to me, looking through all of his belongings, his books, his clothes." His guns, his closet. "I felt like I should have given him another chance. We never really hit it off, and now that he's dead, well . . ."

"It's too late, right?" Sam asked, and I nodded in reply. He said, "Yeah, years go by and you regret never saying the things you should, and when that person's dead, it's too late."

I nod, sip from my drink, start thinking about how I'll get the funds to buy this place and how I'll keep it secret, when Sam asks, "So?"

"Hmmm?" I say, and the call of the loons soothes me now, instead of making me feel uncomfortable, and I guess I have made the right decision.

"What would you have said to Uncle Leo, if you had the chance?" Sam asks.

Thank you, I think. I think I would have said thank you, for recognizing who I was, and what kind of person I would become, and thank you for making it happen.

"Nothing much," I say, lying with ease. "I guess I would have welcomed the chance to talk to him," and in that phrase, at least, I am telling the truth.

"Really?" Sam asks. "What would you have talked about?"

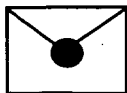
I turn and smile. "Stories."

"Stories?"

I smile again. "I'm sure we would have had a hell of a lot of stories to tell each other," and no matter what else Sam says that night, I leave it at that. ●

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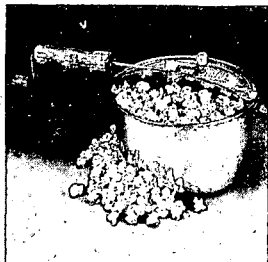


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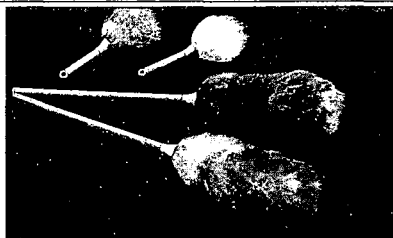


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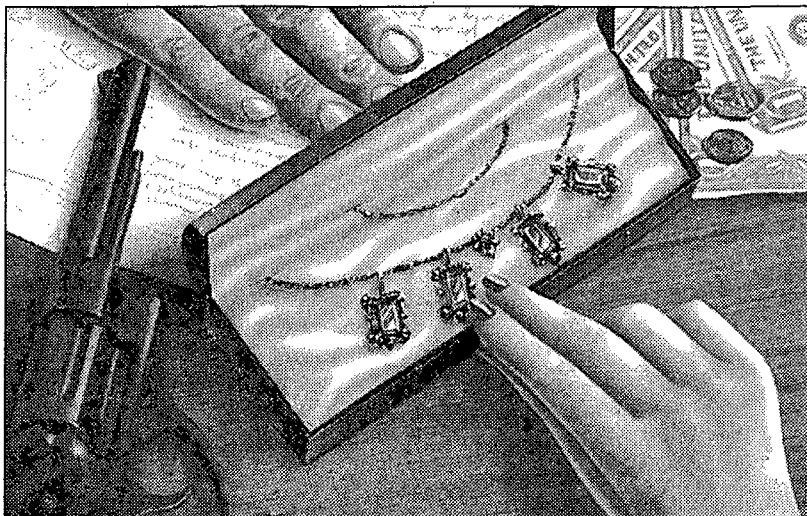


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PINK SAPPHIRES

by Suzanne Jones

There is cosmic laughter. It does exist, for Shakespeare heard it. It is as cold and silvery as bells on a frosty night. The gods can be amused. They are indifferent not to our antics but our suffering. Their laughter floats in the breezes over battlefields when the hurly-burly's done, and sometimes in the small hours after midnight it can even be heard in the wind rattling through the empty streets of Gilead, that small, dusty town which exists only in memory now and has become detached from any particular geographical place by the ever-widening gulf of time.

It was in the spring of 1929, and most everyone was prosperous. It was a time of frenetic plenty and the widely held belief that wealth was the inevitable product of hard work and luck. The amount of luck needed to produce great wealth was the principal variable in our formula for success which—if not

uniquely American—we had made the confident credo of our burgeoning middle class, elbowing aside *E Pluribus Unum*, which the War Between the States had forever rendered irrelevant—at least in our part of Texas.

It was a formula to which Fred Cherry passionately subscribed—though he believed he had less luck than some would have attributed to him. There is a small block of granite out in back of the Gilead courthouse, largely because the town council couldn't think of any other place to put it. It bears the inscription: Fred Cherry, Mayor. In Appreciation, 1920–1929.

Fred would have been outraged by it since the principal reason it is there is because no one ever discovered who walked into Fred's jewelry store one evening in late December in 1929 and put two slugs from a .38 special into him. Not an especially popular man, Fred had only been elected mayor as a compromise between ranching interests and those of the Chamber of Commerce, and then—as it will in small towns—habit just settled in. (In Gilead, whoever wanted to serve on the eight-man council pretty much could, and it was the council who elected the mayor.) The council collectively felt some relief at Fred's passing and sought to assuage its guilt with the monument at the taxpayers' expense. At least that was what some thought.

Fred was respected; though not generally liked, since he had an unattractive shrewdness about him, a disconcerting sharpness in dealing with his fellows, and a scarcely concealed brutality toward his gentle wife and family. He was a short, bald man with broad shoulders and the stereotypical quick temper and blustery manner of the first-generation Irishman whose son he was. He had the astuteness and enough charm to have married the handsome daughter of a second-generation, well-to-do Scottish farmer. Fred's wife had dutifully produced seven children,

Suzanne Jones spent her childhood in the rocky hill country of north Texas, and returns to that location in many of her stories. Like the protagonist of "Pink Sapphires," she has an athletic bent, which manifests itself in high-angle rock climbing, sailboat racing, whitewater kayaking, and other sports. †

only two of whom had survived to adulthood: Cassie and Sibyl. The others had been carried off by various maladies: diphtheria, rheumatic fever, and by accident. Two boys had been stillborn.

The eldest child, Sibyl, married young and moved to Dallas where she bore one unremarkable offspring after another.

The youngest, Cassie, thus had been an only child since she was eight years old and the apple of her daddy's eye, insomuch as Fred could be said to have had one, apart from his business. This was the daughter to whom Fred would give the pink sapphires just before he died. At the time, Fred's gift appeared to be the last act of a man about to fall off a cliff. We thought we understood it, but now, after so many years, it has become as much of a mystery to us as his daughter's marrying Jefferson T. Carter III was to most of Gilead.

Cassie Cherry was the best tennis player (man or woman) in Nueces County, and many of us expected greater things from her than marrying Jefferson T. (who would leave her for a hosiery salesman two years after Fred's murder). True, Jefferson T.'s grandfather, the first and most distinguished of the Jefferson T. Carters, was the richest man in Nueces County, the owner of the first Ford dealership in the county, the dry-goods store, and the president of the bank, but Fred Cherry was the owner of the largest (if only) jewelry store in Gilead, a gentleman rancher, and our mayor.

From the pictures in yellowed albums, male pulchritude could not have been Cassie's motivation. Jefferson T. had a soft, faintly foolish face beneath a mass of golden curls and looked a little like a tormented sheep. No picture of the hosiery salesman has survived, but he must have been a creature of strong resolve and considerable persuasion, since Jefferson T. didn't look like he would have had the gumption to leave Cassie no matter what.

Perhaps it was this lack of character or will which attracted Cassie in the first place. If she had to spend a lifetime shackled to another soul, it would be better not to have to cope daily with an intransigence as deep-seated as her own.

Or it might have been Jefferson T.'s family tree, offering her the shelter of prestige and prominence, under which she had intended to recline over the next half century or so, having the one or two children the times required of her as her contribution to the distinguished line.

It was clear to our town that it was Cassie's idea to marry Jefferson T., since marrying so young in general was unusual in Carters, and marrying Cassie in particular unlikely since the Carters—like the Wilkeses of Mrs. Mitchell's novel—always married cousins if they couldn't do better.

Not that Cassie was without recommendation. She was a small, dark beauty with a crushing forehand, powerful first serve, and enough speed to run around her backhand. She was bright, but with a strength of will which was alarming in a young woman of only seventeen, which was her age when she first came to Jefferson T.'s attention by smashing him in the mouth with a tennis ball at net.

He had been at home on spring vacation from Annapolis (with no war in sight, a distinguished career in the military seemed more than acceptable to the "old gentleman"—as the First liked to style himself—and the Third—as Jefferson T. was called within the confines of the Carters' stately home—had chosen the navy even though, or perhaps because, Gilead was several hundreds of miles from the nearest body of salt water. However odd the choice, it would prove to be characteristic).

During the spring, the male Carters (First and Second) played doubles with their middle-aged male cousins every Saturday morning at the country club before the weather got too hot. One fateful Saturday the old man (the First) had stayed home with the gout, and Jefferson T. (the Third) was substituting for his grandfather when one of the cousins was felled with hamstring. Cassie had been grudgingly asked to finish out the set.

The Carters had of course noticed Cassie prior to that Saturday, though they had only acknowledged her presence with an occasional frosty nod. How could they not notice her? She seemed always to be on the court adjacent, serving endless baskets of balls, or abusing the backboard hour after hour with punishing ground strokes.

And for a long time—during practice after practice, week after week—she had been aware of them, envying their easy camaraderie and supreme confidence in their Carter superiority. Until that Saturday morning, none of them had ever asked her to play, not even to hit with them until the requisite number of Carters had assembled for the match. She was just Fred Cherry's girl.

Splitting the lip of the young man at point-blank range would not have been the opening gambit chosen by many young

women, but Cassie had seized the opportunity to get Jefferson T.'s attention. She hadn't seen him (he was three years her senior) since he had been in junior high (his family had shipped him to a prep school in the East in an attempt to infuse him with the urbanity and wit not commonly found in our part of the country). Having just set eyes on him again attired in the natty white flannels favored by the young men of the day, Cassie was determined to have him, not for a spouse as was widely supposed, but for her principal summer suitor. The little extra zip she had put on the ball may have been the result of being ignored by so many Carters for so long.

She tended his injury very solicitously and made a point of stopping by the Carter home the next afternoon to inquire about the progress of his recovery. Now, whereas the Carter men (except for the First) appear to have been rather easily deluded in matters of the heart, the Carter women, especially Jefferson T.'s mother and the "Old Bat" (as the First's wife was known by most of the town) were no fools. The sight of Cassie's trim, athletic good looks as she scrambled out of her daddy Fred's yellow roadster the next afternoon, filled them with unease. In retrospect, the Carter women's expectations for Jefferson T. were wildly ambitious. They hoped that he would choose a bride from an old family from the East. That it was unlikely any of those eligible young women might set her cap for the skittish Third did not diminish that hope, though they had done little to advance the cause themselves—apart from arranging some introductions for him via a cousin in Baltimore. The Third was still young (the Carter men traditionally married late), and his mother and grandmother, until that moment in the spring of 1929, hadn't felt any urgency. The precariousness of their position—since there were no suitable Carter cousins presently available—was soon evident to them. With each brisk step that Cassie took toward the massive oak and glass front door of the Carters' home, the Carter women could see the desirable Eastern connection becoming a more and more distant prospect. If their hopes for Jefferson T.'s marital future were less than realistic, their general assessment of his character was not. They knew he would be vulnerable to any determined assault, especially one so attractive. But knowing it and being able to deflect it were different matters.

Had Cassie been candid with them about her intentions toward the Third, she could have saved them many a sleepless

night, but candor in such matters, at that time, was in short supply. Cassie's visit had begun by her responding to the Mesdames Carters' somewhat frigid inquiries as to her plans—now that her high school studies were nearing their completion. She assured the women that she would be attending the University of Georgetown (Texas) in the fall, where she would at last get some respectable coaching for her tennis. The unlikelihood of these assurances threw the Carter women into a frenzy of confusion and suspicion. That Cassie might only view their Third as a desirable escort to a country club dance now and again did not occur to them. They assumed Cassie's goals were their own at her age, and the dearth of presentable young men in Gilead that spring to rival the Third filled them with apprehension.

Nonetheless, despite this rather alarming skirmish, they conducted Cassie to where Jefferson T. was reclining in a hammock on the capacious screened porch at the rear of the Carter home. A splendid white-enameled electric fan swept a breeze across a block of ice in a matching white-enameled tub to cool the fallen hero's brow.

Cassie prevented the young man from springing to his feet with a genteel wave of her hand (that is, she assumed his convulsive movement at her approach was an attempt to gather himself to rise). His relatives delayed awhile to fuss over him, and then reluctantly withdrew.

After exchanging the minimum pleasantries required, Cassie came to the reason for her visit. "I do feel so bad about your poor lip. I must make it up to you."

Jefferson T.'s upper lip was cut and swollen, which gave him more of a sheeplike appearance than ever.

"I shall therefore ask if you would be so kind as to accompany me to the dance Saturday. At the club," she added as Jefferson T.'s eyes widened. "It's the least I can do," she said graciously.

As he began to stammer a response, she interrupted briskly, "You do dance?"

"—well, yes."

"Good. You may pick me up at eight o'clock in front of my daddy's store—unless you'd rather I drove?"

Jefferson T. numbly shook his head, and Cassie prudently took her leave. A brief dash through enemy lines was enough to content her for her first sally. She had all of Saturday night to secure her advantage and plan her next move. She could hardly keep smashing him in the face and apologizing.

She needn't have worried about finding other pretexts to win enough of the agreeable young man's interest to have a reliable escort for the summer's festivities. With her father's keen nose for weakness, she soon perceived that Jefferson T. was accustomed to taking direction from women, was, in fact, most comfortable when decisions were removed from his purview altogether. Cassie had only to ask, and Jefferson T. would oblige, and so ask she did whenever it suited her. She considered shyness a refuge of the weak.

However, even though Jefferson T. was thus ideal husband material for someone like Cassie who preferred making her own decisions, Cassie had no intention of marrying anyone anytime soon. She was looking forward to living away from home and developing a backhand to go with her other formidable weapons, since she yearned to better her semifinal appearance in the Ladies Lawn Tennis Championships of the State of Texas of 1929. And she was confident that there would be many presentable young men to be found in Georgetown with whom she could amuse herself. But Jefferson T. that summer was the finest swain Gilead had to offer. When he returned to Gilead for summer vacation, Cassie scooped him up with an ease that caused the jaw muscles of the Carter women to ache with anxiety.

Though that fine, hot summer passed innocently enough in a whirl of dances and doubles, outings on the lake and hayrides, with no apparent damage to Cassie's virtue, the Third's eligibility, or either's reputation (despite the natural urges of young men and women and the indecent moan of the saxophone)—it was with decided relief that the Carter women welcomed summer's end, and the Third's return to the naval academy. And to their surprise, they observed that Cassie did go off to Georgetown, where she began to work on her backhand when not attending the occasional class in social studies or education or English Lit.

Gratitude was not an emotion familiar to the Carter women, and so they only felt a general easing of tension as Cassie and their Third went their separate ways in the fall. They did not, however, delude themselves that the Third had slipped the hook. Cassie had clearly thrown him back. But if they weren't grateful, Jefferson T. was as he returned to the company of young men his age. His memory of that summer was that Cassie was a smashing girl, a whiz at tennis, and a nifty dancer, who reminded him a lot of the women in his family, and it was with

some relief he noted that she showed little inclination to join their ranks.

This was destined to change.

What occasioned the change was the advent of the Great Depression. It did not happen all at once in our part of Texas. No bodies crashed to the street, since there were no buildings in Gilead high enough from which to fling oneself and do any real damage. But there was a gradual feeling of unease that crept over the town like ashes from a distant fire. People glumly read the newspapers and quit buying cars, and jewelry sales fell off to nothing. The dry-goods store began to close early.

There were never any bread lines in Gilead, and though the churches would not start to distribute canned goods to the needy for another year, the people who had retail jobs now began to fall victim to the lack of trade, one by one. Some people already were talking of moving to California to get work. The price of beef would soon drop to the point that some ranchers would begin to shoot their cattle instead of driving them to market.

The rapid downward spiral in the economy affected some more than others, and some sooner rather than later. Though the Carters probably lost more than the rest of Nueces County combined, they had more to lose. Even as things went from bad to worse, they still had more money than anyone else. It would take time to exhaust the contents of their coffers.

This was not the case with Cassie's father Fred. Fred hadn't lived long enough to have amassed the Carters' kind of wealth, though he had worked hard and been as ruthless as he dared. In an effort to close the financial gap between the Cherrys and the Carters (Fred was easily as competitive as his daughter), Fred had put most of his money and all his luck with a broker in Wichita Falls. There were buildings in Wichita Falls high enough to leap off, and if Fred's broker had an ounce of decency, he probably should have availed himself of one, but instead he decamped for California, leaving Fred with mortgages due and a jewelry business that was fast slipping beneath the waves. Having borrowed heavily to invest, Fred now found himself with dwindling resources to satisfy increasingly anxious creditors.

Feeling sure that a Democrat in the White House would be enough to put things right, Fred did what he could to buy time. He reduced inventory at the store and sold off the breeding stock at the ranch for what he could get. He borrowed on his life insurance policy and from his frugal father-in-law to cover his

mortgage payments. If he could make it to Christmas, he would be all right. People would spend at Christmas. But by early December, when no holiday crowds bustled through the store, Fred knew he was out of options and out of time.

It was a blustery cold evening two days after Christmas when he proposed to Cassie that she leave school and he would give her the pink sapphire necklace which he had observed her mooning over in the window of the store.

It was true that Cassie had admired the necklace, but even though Fred did not discuss business with his family, she too had been affected by the general gloom that had spread even as far as a university town like Georgetown and had not dared to ask her father for the necklace. Not even for Christmas.

Four emerald-cut pink sapphires hung from a delicately fashioned, ornate silver chain. Beneath each stone was a diamond chip in a tiny, heart-shaped setting. She knew that the price Fred had been asking for it was very dear, and with what she had read in the papers and the somberness of the current Christmas season, she had decided to cut back on her expenditures. Even though pink was one of her favorite colors.

Now the idea of not returning to Georgetown fell on her like a chilling rain. She looked without affection at her father's bald pate in the light from the desk lamp as he sat hunched over his accounts. The .38 special was on top of the desk where he always kept it when he counted his cash receipts in the room above the store. Seventeen dollars and twelve cents were stacked neatly in front of him, which was exactly what the store had taken in during the day—all for watch repair.

It seemed unfair of him to sacrifice her future to shore up his business. It wasn't her fault that business was bad, nor had she expressed one whimper at the prospect of their moving from the ranch to one of the rental properties in town. Of course she was seldom home now that she was attending the university, and not all that fond of living two miles from Gilead anyway. But certainly she might have put up some resistance if only for her mother's sake. Her mother, who had flinched at the words from her husband's lips as from a blow, loved living in the handsome house on the ranch. But her father evidently did not appreciate that Cassie hadn't opposed him then, though she had often opposed him where her mother was concerned.

Perhaps he sensed that to Cassie, the ranch already belonged to the dark and distant past. But now the future, which had

looked so bright to her just last summer, seemed to be dimming as well. The clouds had definitely rolled in.

"I'd rather go to school," Cassie said—although it really wasn't what she meant. She didn't care about school. She just wanted her way of life to continue as agreeably as before, but she had the feeling that was not going to be possible.

"Take it," he said. He leaned forward into the light and pushed the black-velvet-covered case across the table toward his daughter. "Put it on. See how it looks next to your skin."

Cassie opened the case.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" he asked. "You want it, don't you?"

She looked numbly at the pink stones in their delicate web of silver lying against the white satin.

The wind rattled the windows. It was late. Cassie had impulsively stopped by after her date when she noticed the light burning above the store. Now she was sorry that she had done so, though she supposed this conversation would have had to take place sometime soon anyway.

"But what will I do?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady as she saw her life sliding away into oblivion.

"Do? Do what other girls do. Find a job." Fred leaned back into the dark where she could not read his expression. "There's nothing much in Gilead for you, but you can stay with your sister in Dallas until you find something. Or marry one of those young men who follow you about. Your mother's done well enough for herself without going to any university."

If she got a job, how could she hope to get enough practice time to be competitive in the state championships? And the coach at the university wouldn't be available to her. Get a job? What did she know how to do except play tennis and dance?

Cassie looked at the array of gleaming stones, the color of which was as delicate as the flush mounting on her own cheeks. "Why couldn't we just sell it and use the money for school?"

Fred's laugh was a short, bitter sound. "Take it," he repeated.

Then she realized that if her father could have sold the necklace, it wouldn't be lying there in front of her, so very beautiful, so very expensive, and as worthless to her as if it were dross.

Everything she had worked for—the long hours at practice, the drills, the years of discipline she had exercised over her body—now would come to nothing.

Marry? Spend her life as her mother had, having promised to

obey some male as unpleasant and arbitrary as her father? She felt the tears sting her eyes.

She resented his hardness, his implacability, his indifference. His confidence in his own opinions, and his fine disregard of the feelings of her mother and herself.

She wasn't a fool. The necklace had to be part of the inventory. The store was mortgaged (she knew that much about her father's business), and the inventory had to be part of the security for the loan. She doubted that the necklace was his to give. It wasn't a real offer that he was making her. It was no offer at all. There would be no Georgetown in the spring—regardless of whether or not she fastened the necklace about her neck.

As she fumbled with the clasp, she wondered why he bothered, why he wanted her to agree to what he had already determined. She felt a rush of anger at his insistence that she acquiesce in the destruction of all her plans.

Fred got to his feet and went to the window behind her and stared sightlessly into the dark. A blue norther was sweeping the town. Its chilly wind must have pierced to the bone the solitary figure hurrying along the street below.

Fred slid his hands into his hip pockets and rocked back on his heels. It was a posture she had seen him assume many times. It usually signaled a change of subject. As far as he was concerned, her future was settled.

"They say a man can still do well for himself in California," Fred said to the dark.

He then seemed to regret what he had said and turned toward Cassie, although he did not meet her eyes. He already had the distant look of a stranger, of a traveling man.

Maybe she wouldn't have had to endure that conversation after all had she not stopped by the store that night. He hadn't been expecting her. She touched the sapphires at her throat. They were making it hard for her to breathe. The necklace was just an afterthought on his part. Something to remember him by.

"I'd send for you and your mother," he added, "just as soon as I got settled—"

The sound of the shots was mostly covered by the wind. No one could be found who had heard them.

The necklace and the \$17.12 were all that was missing from the store—according to the books. Some weeks later the valise into which Fred had put the few things he had intended to take with him to a new life was discovered where it had washed up

on the bank of Salt Creek. The chief of police and the sheriff hadn't known what to make of that, but they had duly noted the broken lock on the door at the back of the store and the missing money and necklace, and deemed Fred to have been murdered in the commission of a robbery. Which was as good a reason as any—given the times.

There was enough money from Fred's life insurance (after the loan was deducted from the proceeds) to preserve both the store and the ranch for a few more months and pay Cassie's tuition and room and board at Georgetown for the spring semester. The weather that year was hotter than usual, and Cassie suffered a heat stroke during practice even before the championships began. She entered anyway but had to default in the second round. She would never play competitively again.

Jefferson T., in his next to last year at the naval academy, had developed a nervous stomach—what with all the financial problems plaguing his family—and formed an aversion to the rolling motion of ships large and small. When he came home on spring break, he and Cassie announced their engagement.

The Carter women put up only feeble opposition to the match, since the failure of the bank had taken the heart out of them, and Fred Cherry's girl seemed as good as the Third was likely to do—things being what they were. Jefferson T. left the academy, and after the marriage he assumed the management of his grandfather's dry-goods store.

By the time the hosiery salesman sauntered into the dry-goods store two years later, the ranch was gone, the jewelry store was gone, and Cassie and her mother were living with Jefferson T. in a small rental house across from the high school.

After Jefferson T.'s defection, Cassie and her mother moved in with Sibyl in Dallas, where Cassie got a job with the telephone company. Ten months later she married her supervisor.

All through the years, and a child, and yet a third husband, and various financial ups and downs, Cassie doggedly hung on to the pink sapphires, though she rarely wore them at all, and never wore them in public. It was with pride and satisfaction, however, that she pressed them into her daughter's hands on the child's eighteenth birthday—as if over the years they had come to matter to her. As if, over the years, they had appreciated.

"They were very expensive," Cassie told the girl.

Many years later, after Cassie's death—since the daughter had never worn the necklace (its ornateness had become hopelessly old-fashioned) she decided to impress the women with whom she played bridge at the Irvine Country Club. She intended to have the stones mounted into four rings, three of which she would give to the other members of her foursome, who had been very generous to her in the year or so that she and her husband had belonged to the club. One she would keep for herself. It was a wonderfully extravagant gesture which she could ill afford except that all it would actually cost her would be to reset the stones.

She took her mother's necklace to a jeweler who specialized in such things, rather pleased with her frugal ingenuity. Though she had inherited that frugality not from her mother (in whom it had been an acquired trait) but from the telephone supervisor; she looked very like her mother as she leaned on the case of watches over which the jeweler had spread a square of black velvet and the necklace. Her excitement and anticipation turned to stunned disbelief as he told her regretfully that the stones were glass. Over the noise from the street—had she not been in such distress—she might have heard the sound of tiny silver bells.

That Cassie never knew that the sapphires weren't real we may be certain. To her they had little or no value anyway. She could not wear them or sell them or trade them for anything that mattered to her. She had only kept them because they were hers. A gift from her father.

Cassie must have died serene in the belief that the necklace would be worth something to her daughter. Fair market value after so many years. If in the end she had left her daughter no more than what Fred had left her, intent ought to count for something.

But Fred has continued to puzzle us over the years. Had he been able to sell the sapphires and replace them with glass, intending to use the money to make a new start in California unencumbered by his wife and his daughter's expensive tastes? If so, what happened to the money? And why then would he have insisted Cassie take the necklace when he knew the stones were fakes? Was he inviting her to betray herself in order to lessen his own guilt?

Probably not. Fred hadn't much of a philosophic bent.

Such puzzles cannot be solved by mortals with our limited vision and confused minds and murky hearts. Perhaps Fred had intended only to amuse. ●

EDITOR'S NOTE

For 54 years *EQMM* has been entertaining readers with the works of first-ranked mystery writers. In all those years there has been little change to our physical appearance. This July issue is the result of an effort on the part of our editorial and art staffs to make reading *EQMM* an even more pleasurable experience for you. We've added story illustration for the first time in our history and have opened up the pages for ease in reading. New foot lines will help you find your place in the magazine; our new type faces reflect mystery's golden age. What hasn't changed is the content of *EQMM*; we're still the magazine you've loved and supported for so long, and our priority is to satisfy your craving for a good mystery.

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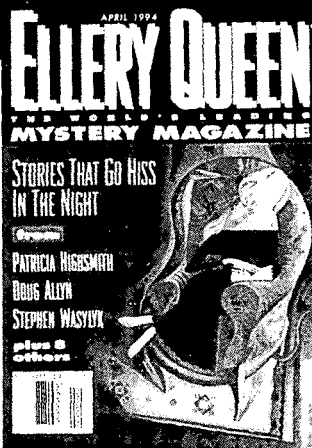
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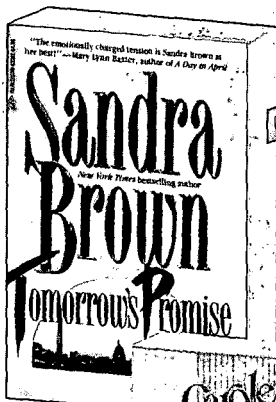
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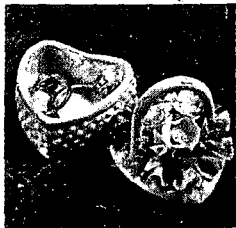
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